

The Quiet and The Lonely

It's just a story ...

I.

Looks like rain today. That seems like a good thing to say to start up a conversation. I just hope no one wants a good chat.

“Slow down.”, “Breathe”, “Think about what you are saying.”

That’s all I hear when I try to have a conversation with my family. It’s easy to take for granted the ease of speech when it’s just natural for you. For me, speaking is what I fear most.

For a split second before I open my mouth, I’m normal. Then the freezing happens. My eyes get wider, more panicked. My face turns red almost instantaneously, and the breath freezes. Time slows down as I hope and pray it comes out with ease. Then...

“He..e..e...eee...l..l..ll....o.”

I see your laughter or pity. They both cut deep just missing vital organs. Every time I just want to crawl in a hole and fucking die but that would be too compassionate for this world.

You feel some sense of superiority because at least, thank God, you don’t sound like that idiot. For good or bad, you feel better about yourself, if only for an instant.

“What doesn’t kill you, makes you stronger.” Fuck that, I never had the choice. It’s not strength when it’s only survival. Survival is the one and only thing your brain truly cares about. It’s what you are born doing, surviving.

I came into this world two months before anyone expected me here, two months before my mother was prepared. I came into this world in the height of anxiety and panic. Anxiety and panic would play a much larger role in my life as it went on, it was a fitting start for sure.

I had no idea of who I was. There was no me. There was no self to speak of. I was merely an animal gasping for air trying to hold on for a minute longer, trying to not escape before I could even open my eyes. Death arrived into this world just as I did. Death was born inside of me, waiting for his moment to strike. For whatever reason my little body did not want to give in. Is it strength when you don't even know you are doing it? Was I brave when there wasn't even an "I" to begin with?

The earliest sense of kindness in this life is the fact that a baby doesn't have a sense of existential dread. There is no life or death, only a sense of wonder that glows around everything a child sees. Automatically controlled by mood and need. Happy when fed. Happy when given attention. Happy when comfortable. Undeniably upset when hungry. Shriekingly disappointed when uncomfortable. Demandingly angry when attention isn't directed their way. It's simple. It's comforting to know that death isn't something ever thought about in the little ones mind. You are truly free at this point in life, but you don't even know that. It doesn't mean anything to you at this point because there is no internal need for meaning. Could you imagine the children's book, "Baby's Search for Meaning". We often can't see the gifts in life until we look back and realize, in fact, many event's we didn't even notice, were true gifts. Only then does the value show.

Much of my early life was spent in a clear box attached to tubes and sensors, or so I was told anyway. Thankfully I don't remember that, even though I can imagine it. My parents would come see me as often as they could, again, what do I know. How could I even know that. A memory is nothing more than a hopeful movie at times. I hope everything I was told was true. Sometimes I wish this little body would have just drifted away to the void from which I came. I was perfectly content well before I was born when I wasn't "I". I was just a hope and a dream in someone's mind. I was maybe a driving force for some search of meaning and motivation for them. Maybe that preconfigured "I" was what got my parents through the day.

Would the little "I" that was lying in that incubator be the motivation at that point, or would I be the tear that flowed down my mother's cheek, or the sense of dread in my father's day. We fail to realize there is no true "I" for we don't have any control over who we are in our early days. We are whatever projection is cast upon us. Pity, disappointment, resentment, dread, anxiety and panic. Was this what I was in my first few days? Was this my name?

I could see it in my father's face when talking. "Slow down and breath! Don't rush your words."

I know he would have done anything to have taken my stutter away. I know he must have laid in bed at night and wonder what he did wrong. Why did I have a stutter? Was it his fault? Unfortunately, all I could hear was, *You aren't good enough and you are a failure. My son is damaged goods. Un-returnable! Unredeemable!*

For many years I was resentful to him. I felt he wasn't hearing my words, but hearing my faults every time I opened my mouth. Silence

became my scream. My deafening silence became my cry for help. If God created everyone in his image, he must have some real issues.

Oh, my mind sure goes off into it's tangents and rants doesn't it. I came here for a nice quiet day. That's an unheard of dream in my mind. It's never silence, much less nice.

Oh look, someone's coming this way.

"Looks like it may rain..." the stranger said.

"Yyyyees...s.s.s.Yeah," I reluctantly pushed out.

There it is, there's that look my Dad would give me. That uncomfortable disappointment and pity.

*When I was born
I was born to fight
The words were trouble
and wouldn't come out right
So I would just walk, in the quiet*

*I thought long and hard
on the words I said
I would change them around in my head
but the words, were still a mighty fight*

*Others would laugh
and call me names
They thought my words
were mighty strange
I would just hurt, in the quiet*

*I dreamed of times
of better days
I dreamed my trouble
would go away
The words were a battle, everyday*

*The fight of words gave me a life
It gave me a gift
It gave me an eye
That could only be learned, in the quiet.*

II.

Well that was a bit awkward. I tend to overshare to everyone I meet. Oh I know you aren't real but it helps me to get my thoughts in order. I tend to need to after my therapy appointments. It's a pretty heavy bag when I leave there, a lot to unpack as he would say. If it's alright with you, I'm not going to act out the stuttering anymore. It's too weird for me and I certainly don't need pity from my imaginary friend. We are friends aren't we? Of course we are, you are my oldest friend after all.

You've always been right beside me through this journey. Although, I must say your advice is for shit. That's not your fault though. You're only as knowledgeable as I am after all. Poor fella.

It was so much easier when I was little, as far as you are concerned. I could really talk to you then. No one would even bat an eye.

"Oh look at this precious little fella, yammering away, playing make believe."

I don't think that's the response I would get today though. Pretty sure 5150 would be the response today. I'm very careful what I say to my therapist though.

"So, how have you been?"

"Oh, just want to move to Alaska and freeze myself to death."

“Oh I know it’s too hot isn’t it.”

“Oh, yeah, Haha. Joke. Right.”

But you don’t judge me though. You always know how to listen.

What other choice do you have anyway...

III.

Sorry for just walking away like that. I'm good at just turning off and hitting that autopilot button.

Do you ever feel invisible? Like people just walk right through you. I don't mean walk over you. I'm talking about like you never even existed.

I seem to attract the attention of assholes and cunts. When we first moved to this town, I had to go to summer care for kids because of the area of town we lived in. It was only temporary but temporary felt like 20 years. I went to a daycare called LaPetite. Can't even make that shit up. That's a recipe for getting your ass kicked right there. LaPetite. Anyway, my first day there, some of the resident bullies started calling me names. Porky Pig comes to mind. I'm sure there was a barrage of other equally heart warming names, but that one sticks out for other reasons.

I was in tears through the day. Why are these people so mean to me? What did I do to them? Those thoughts kept running through my mind. Finally what felt like 40 hours later, my dad picked me up.

"How was your first day bud?"

"I hate it here," I said quietly, looking out the window at absolutely nothing.

“Oh, it’ll get better. You just miss your friends.”

“No! I hate it here! They hate me! I never want to go back!”

I ran into my new, temporary, unpacked room and climbed into bed. My breath leaving me as I tried to keep from being heard while I cried.

“What’s wrong sweetie?” my mother said. Hearing the warmth and comfort from my sweet mom. The familiarity and safety I so missed.

“I didn’t do anything to them. I just wanted to be their friend,” was about all I could get out.

“I’m sorry honey. Boys can be so cruel.”

“It wasn’t boys. It was the girls.”

Oh yeah, did I mention it was all the girls that unleashed the bully from hell talk on me. Yep, girls. How fucking pathetic is that!

Anyway, I had to go back there for the rest of the summer. No one talked to me after that. That was the only time when your parents could intervene and you not get your ass kicked. I was older than the other kids. I was bigger than them as well. Somehow though I felt inferior to them. I was the strange new kid. The freak. I was porky pig after all. Sometimes I just have to bitch about those little cunts. I’m sure they grew up to be model cunts of society and members of the FCA, yeah I’m sure you can figure out what that means.

It didn’t get much better through school. The teachers were more concerned about getting boob-jobs than they were teaching. The only male teacher I had was a unsuccessful wannabe actor. Often cast in the ridiculous local renditions of Shakespeare plays. Shakespeare in the South, that’s what’s it should have been called. He was a real piece of work. I swear he was trying to date the students. Later we

found out he was arrested for inappropriate behavior with minors. Guess I was right about him.

The area we lived in was what you would call affluent. Our neighborhood wasn't so much as the surrounding areas. Mom and Dad both worked in education. It's not that they cared about the future generations of America. It was more so they cared about the future of their summer vacations and winter breaks. They both had finally worked up enough degrees and masters and certifications to get good jobs. My mom had her doctorate. Took me a bit too long to figure out she couldn't write prescriptions. For some reason I felt like I had to preface that with new friends and acquaintances.

Anyway, back to the big titty teachers. The local affluent lawyers and executives had wives that needed good teaching jobs. So naturally they all landed pretty nice gigs at the local schools. One year I'd see the teachers who were already fit and attractive, then the next they would have some right large humdingers. I was old enough to appreciate yet not old enough to really understand. The teachers would all huddle in their own little groups before school and at lunch, as if they were the cool girls of the school. Not at all paying attention to anything going on with the students. It was only when a fight would break out that they would even pretend to do their job. It was so ridiculous that in the back corners of the cafeteria at lunch, the love birds would sit there and make out during lunch. Ah to be young and in love, a story that I would not experience at this time.

What I did understand was there was a definite hierarchy of student status. A low enough status and you would be deemed invisible and untouchable. Not saying bad kids were low status. It was the kids that weren't exceptional at being good or being bad that

earned the peasant status. I wasn't the smartest kid in the room. I wasn't one of the bad kids in the room, I was simply a C student. In reality a B student but everyone says C is just average so that fits better.

It was pretty common for people to make fun of me right in front of the teachers. Hell it felt like they were in on it. What respectable adult let's kids bully kids right in front of them. Must of been those "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger," kind of cunts. I wasn't the best at standing up for myself at school but I was very good at holding back the tears. Sticks and stones may break my bones but your words can traumatize me.

It seemed commonplace for the girls to mess with me for being a virgin. I'm pretty sure now it was because I would turn so red and become super uncomfortable really fast. My biology desk partner was constantly telling me she wanted to go outside and take my virginity. Bashful was not in her vocabulary. If she was serious or not, we will never know. As much as I hated her picking on me, there was that part of me that was curious if she was serious. She was pretty well known to indulge in her desires.

IV.

It probably sounds as if I hate women at this point. That couldn't be farther from the truth. I love women. Not in that ultra macho fuck-em-all kind of lustful thinking but rather in the comfort and understanding kind of love. The kind of love that transcends physical contact but still last forever in it's own kind of way. Most of my friends through the years have been women. I feel like I can be myself easier, I don't have to be macho or manly or alpha or whatever term you would like to use. I can't stand the ultra masculine types anyway. Most of the time they talk of women as trophies or some sort of Hemingway conquest. It does fit that they resemble works of fiction because most the time they are. I'd say 99% of their story is bullshit with about 1% of it being truthful.

Even though I would consider myself very much anti-macho, I get put into that category by people who barely know me. I'm 6'1", 245 lbs and I look pissed off most of the time even though I'm hardly thinking about anything that upsets me. When I am upset I'm more sad, the tears flow easier. As the years have passed the dam in my eyes has weakened and it's easier for my tears to spill over onto my cheeks. I get that resting bitch face from my mom. She was very much the model of tough bitch yet her tears flowed frequently as well. Just never in public, or not much anyway.

Kids would think my mom was so mean. They would see that stern face and almost formal speech and conclude she too was a cunt, however that couldn't have been farther from the truth. She was a book that often got judged solely on the cover. So the ultra super macho army face that I have, well that was from my mom.

I was never truly tough. I could fight. I could hold my own in the physical competition department but I was never tough. I'd cry after ball games if my coach would get on to me. I'd cry if someone pushed me into the pool as a prank during a birthday party. Hell I'd cry if my mom gave me that infamous side eye, stop your shit right now glance. No words needed to be spoken, no words could convey that level of seriousness.

While as a kid, I did love my GI Joes and wrestling action figures, I also was very jealous of my neighbors Barbie dream house. That was a nice ass house. I would pretend my GI Joes would marry one of Barbies friends so he could spend time in the dream house, chillin' by the pool drinking those flowery drinks you see on TV all the time. Who wanted to fight a damn war all the time anyway. Joe needed to unwind and relax. Get some of that shell shock out of his head. I didn't really know what that meant but I heard my dad talk about his friends that were in Vietnam. He didn't have to go, he was able to maintain good enough grades in college to avoid the draft. As relieved as he was he never had to go, you could also see the trauma in his eyes from the fear of going. His voice would change and he would go quiet, I never knew what went through his mind but as I got older my imagination filled in those blanks. He came from a generation when men didn't cry, I couldn't conform to that mindset. I cry and cried often, mostly in private though. Suffer in silence was

the common theme for us though. Smile and die on the inside, like a real fucking man.

V.

An education wasn't really, truly high on my priority list after high school. It was more the fear of answering the phone was the greater of the two. I knew whatever job I would get, I would have to talk on the phone. My name isn't hard to say but starting with a vowel just totally fucks up my speech. I hang on starting vowels all the damn time. I couldn't have a name with a plosive beginning like Paul or Peter. Nope that just wouldn't do, that would have been easy to say.

What kind of job would require very little talking on the phone, Accounting, or so I thought. In high school I took Accounting 1, which was a terrible name for the class in reality. It should have been called, if accounting was taught in kindergarten. We had a scissors account in the example. Not even a supplies account, fucking scissors account. Anyway, that's not how it works, I'll spare you the boring details on bean counting, but it's not exactly exciting shit.

The first couple years I went to a community college about two miles from where I went to high school. So really it was like the 13th grade with a few extra people mixed in. I was shocked at how easy it all was. My GPA was 4.0 leaving there and I did not have to study at all. Compared to my high school, this was some low bar stuff. Nothing could really prepare me for the next couple years.

Belhaven College it was called then, now they go by Belhaven University. A Christian College. I was not prepared for this. I didn't want to go out of town for school because I did not want to stay in a dorm. Dorm life just seemed like the perfect opportunity for people to fuck with me continuously. I preferred to drive a few miles down the street to Jackson than relocate to another town.

“Welcome to Intermediate Accounting, if you have a job, quit your job. You will need all your time to study for this class,” was the first thing the professor said, at my first class, on the first day. Holy shit, what have I got myself into. I was not prepared to hear such a grim statement made by a balding man in Jesus sandals sticking out from his ultra wrinkled dollar store special khaki pants with a maroon button up shirt that was about three sizes too big. Belhaven lived up to the dark start. I lost my scholarship my first semester. Almost failed three classes at the start. Managed to pull them up to a somewhat decent grade. I couldn't get out with a 3.0 though, 2.3 was the best I could escape that place with. No need to go too deep in that experience just now. Plenty of time to disappoint the southern crowd with my lack of concern for the Baptist church. If we have anything in the south it's guns and churches, oh and Walmart. We got Walmart as any small town should.

VI.

The two world shifting tragedies I remember the most are Columbine and September 11. Both, I was at home watching TV when I should have been in class. Both, would remain etched into my memory forever. I was no stranger to school shootings. I lived not far from Pearl, Ms. The first school shooting in recent modern times. His victims shall be remembered forever and live on in the memories of those in that small, little sleepy town.

I was sitting in my dad's recliner when I saw the children being marched out of the school after Columbine. I remember the police breaking the glass to get in. I'm pulling this from my memory so I do apologize if the memory isn't serving me exactly as it happened. I don't remember if I cried watching the news or if I just sat there still. I didn't see those guys as monsters. I felt sorry for them. The bullies won while many many others lost. I wish I could have told them life gets better after high school. Only marginally at times but the bullies went away, at least for me. Kids use to ask me when I was going to shoot the school up. I'd say soon. Only to mess with them. I could never do something like that, although I understood how those things happened. Teachers standing there letting others pick on me. Letting others throw things at me all during class. Letting others constantly shower me with mean words, while they stood there and watched

like the cowards they were. Call me what you want, but if you didn't go through it, fuck off ever so kindly. I didn't know it at the time of watching the news broadcast just how many times through my life I would think of those kids, both the victims and the shooters. The teachers, the administration, the parents of all involved. A tragedy doesn't even come close to describing the situation. If only we had learned from that moment.

Fast forward a bit and I remember sitting in my dad's recliner watching the news when the first plane flew into the World Trade Center. I couldn't believe a pilot could make such an horrendous error. How could this even be possible with all the radar systems we had? Was this even real? My mind couldn't believe it. This was utter chaos in our own country. As I was taking a bite of my Honey Nut Cheerios, I heard the reporter say another plane had struck the second building. I looked up just as they were replaying the second hit. This was no accident, this was planned. This was an attack. This was going to change the country as we knew it. This was war.

My mother was already terrified I would be drafted. She had many stories to tell of the Vietnam war. Her friends and family that came back in a pine box or came back a dead man walking with PTSD and addiction. I had several more years before I would be aged out of the draft and even that wasn't a comforting thought. A law in the US is nothing more than a suggestion. They will take what's not theirs just as fast as a common thief. We didn't know what was coming next. We didn't know what would happen. Would they attack on US soil again? Who was responsible, what the hell is going on?!

I returned to class the next day as if nothing had happened.

Shocked, traumatized from seeing humans jump to their death on the news reports. Constantly, over and over and over, playing the clips of people free falling to their death. Burn or fall? What's the best option? Just as we saw the Challenger blow up on take off as a child in school, watching the teacher who was to go to space make it oh so close, only to get blown up before she ever made it. Just as we saw that, with no counseling or even an acknowledgment that we just saw people die right before our eyes in the most horrendous way, we all returned back to school or work, all knowing we just saw the world change forever and we had no choice but to swallow it and move on. Survival. No time for mourning when that Intermediate Accounting test and Christian Interpretation essay was due. God was on our side after all, right?

Just as we moved on from the Challenger explosion, the school shootings, 9-11, and other events from the time. I moved on from school. A Bachelors of Science in Accounting from Belhaven College. Educated, primed and ready to attack the world.

I remember laying on the floor of my parents house, having a gnarly panic attack, although I had no idea what the fuck was really going on. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't make any sense of my thoughts, I was frozen yet crying my eyes out on the dirty carpet. I was terrified. I was terrified I would be a massive failure. I graduated from high school with distinction. I didn't even know what the hell that meant. I didn't know what the honor cord was. I didn't even try. I didn't commit myself, I tried to stay quiet and invisible as much as I could. I didn't apply myself. I was merely surviving. I didn't understand the first fucking thing in those classes I took about

accounting, I had no idea really how the hell I passed because my confidence on every test was right about zero. Business Stats II kicked my ass from one side of the school to the other. Trigonometry annihilated my brain and somehow I got a C. I was no more prepared to be an accountant than Mike Tyson was to be a public speaker. Alas, time waits for no one. It was time to fly high and reach for the stars.

So, I got a job at the local grocery store. Only temporary of course, I was going to be an accountant somewhere soon. I had a degree. That will open all the doors and even some windows. I was going straight to the top. Straight to... the produce department at Winn-Dixie. Not even the successful version of Winn-Dixie, this was the next door do death Winn-Dixie. This was the end. This was a sad sad sad version of what a grocery store should be. I would get up at 5am, drive to work in the dark. Stay until 2, go back around 5pm. Do it all over again the next day. This was what a college education got me. Hell, I wasn't even the damn department manager. I was acting department manager because the actual department manager was overseas trying to hunt down whoever blew up the twin towers.

I lived in a 415 square foot studio apartment. It didn't even have a real door to the apartment. It was a thin, hollow interior door that was the exterior door. The door knob was the cheapest keyed door knob they could get. No dead bolt. The chain was held on by one screw. Secure as Fort Knox. I couldn't afford cable. Cheap frozen burritos and instant noodles was my daily diet. Success was my middle name.

VII.

Fred taught me a lot about life. He showed me the kindness of a friend just by showing up and being there for me in my time of need. He was a trusted friend, the best at keeping secrets, like you. He never judged me in any way, he never looked at me with that sight of disappointment and regret. I could never quite tell what he was thinking but I knew he was there.

I only knew Fred for a couple years but those years mean more to me than he will ever know. The loneliness was tough. The apartment was too quiet, there was no footsteps, no voices echoing through the tiny space. I had a TV but I only had a really crappy antenna picking up a few channels. This was a old style antenna, rabbit ears as I would call them as a kid. I watched a whole lot of CW. Gilmore Girls was one of my favorites, Seventh Heaven was okay but not great, Dawsons Creek never really appealed to me. Charmed was pretty good and I did like Supernatural a lot. I tried to read but my mind would get in the way. I didn't have large spans of time anymore. I had a few hours between shifts, a few hours to recharge my battery which was always on empty at this point and get back to work.

One afternoon after work I returned home to notice my neighbors dog with his head between the post on the balcony, looking down as

if begging for someone to help him. Begging for a drop of water. It was about 110 degrees that day after all. He was a very large blue pit, but a gentle giant. Fred never liked him much, I understand why but I still hoped him and Fred would be better friends. Before I glanced up I said “hey buddy!”, it was right then that I noticed his eyes were void of any sign of life, his tongue sticking out way past a natural state. It was pretty obvious that he was dead. Now I’m not a dog expert but I knew he was gone. I called the front office of the complex and let them know so they could maybe get in touch with the guy. I didn’t know him, we weren’t friends really. I could hear the bass line of his music through the walls and also when him and his girlfriend were having some right complicated disagreements, but I never said more than “Hi” in passing. Actually, I think I did the cool guy head-nod mostly. It wasn’t because I didn’t like talking to people, it was just easier. I didn’t want to get stuck on “Hey” and have people feel like they had to wait the fifteen seconds before I got it all out. If you think that is awkward as hell to wait in silence for someone to finish saying hello, imagine being the person stuck on the damn word. I want to get it finished just as fast as you do buddy, believe me.

Many nights when I would get home, I would put Fred in my pocket. He would just look up at me with those black eyes and squint his little nose up, cute as hell. Oh, sorry, yeah Fred was my hamster. My first pet. My first little buddy that was mine and not a friend. I never had any pets growing up. I think it was enough for my parents to deal with children all day at work, and also with the adults that had just the same amount of attention span and intelligence as the kids in the class. Also having a child of their own posed another

responsibility that was a full time job. Adding another child-like deviant into the mix was probably a little too much for them.

I didn't like dogs growing up. I had a run in with a mutt in the neighborhood when I was little. As I would grow up, I would tell people I was attacked by the most viscous dog in the tri-county area. A damn regal kin to livestock, a dog that was essentially the king of a bull. He damn near ripped my ankle off as I tried to protect the neighborhood kids from the satan spawn that was this unkind demonic beast.

Unfortunately, that story is much like a lot of my stories, a pure work of fiction. It was the fear itself that manifested the dog attack. It was fear itself that brought me to my knees on the blacktop, leaving remnants of the road imbedded in my skin, leaving my body to push it out over decades time. I can barely see the scar now, but I can still see my mothers face and hear the scream of terror when I stood up from the street. I couldn't feel anything at this point, I didn't know why she was screaming so much, I thought I did something wrong. That was until I looked down and saw my favorite Alf t-shirt ripped to shreds. My knee was bubbling blood and I could feel the rocks in my hand start to cut like shards of glass. I could slowly feel my knee, I could feel every bit of the pain that reared its head a few seconds after realizing just what happened. People say fear can't hurt you. This was my young lesson to prove that theory wrong, even though I didn't understand that for many years to come.

My neighbor had a little Jack Russel terrier, a little petite dog with small man syndrome. In fact a good name would have been LaPetite, throw a beret on him and bam, cute little dog. He got out from the neighbors back yard and just wanted to play, so he started running

towards us. I was terrified, my instinct kicked in and I started running. A full on sprint for my life. The devil himself nipping at my heels. I almost made it across the street, but at the last minute the toe of my shoe caught the ground and I went flying across the street. For a moment I was Superman, until I was the mother's son sliding across the street leaving a part of himself there for the sun to bake in.

I can barely see the scar today, but I know it's still just beneath the surface. I couldn't stand to be around dogs after that for a very long time. My childhood was gripped by the fear of dogs. I didn't know what panic and anxiety was at that time. I wouldn't hear the word trauma for many many years. The movie, The Sandlot, didn't have shit on my fear of dogs. Thankfully as I aged, my fear of dogs was healed in my heart and I got to experience the exceptional joy of animals. Dogs, cats, hamsters, goats, pigs, cows, oh the list could go on. Fred was the beginning of that healing. Fred was my first therapist. One of the best I might add, and a down right great listener. I still think of my little friend often, I know the world was a much better place when my little Fred was here. I hope I run into him again someday, in whatever form he may take. I'll know his soul when I'm near him, I'll know when I see my sweet little friend again.

VIII.

I'm not sure if there is a soul alive that enjoys their first run of job interviews. Shortly after I graduated college, I began the train of job interviews. One after another. A few weeks part, all greeted with sleepless nights and much praying that I would get a job. I feared I would be the one college graduate that would never ever land a job. Go down in the Guinness Book of World Records as the dumbest-smart man alive.

63 years of job searching with no job. BS degree in Accounting that would in fact turn in to true BS. That's how it would go, or something like that. Thankfully, that would not be the reality but my future was wide open at the time and all I could think about is every failure I ever had and every failure I ever would have. The headstone would read, COLLEGE GRADUATE and nothing more. My ultimate achievement in life would be a very overpriced piece of paper.

For the first 20 or so interviews, I would wear the sport coat that my father wore to his high school dance decades earlier. Vintage style really wasn't a hot thing yet and this work of art, was not what someone would have in mind if it was. My arms looked about 4 inches too long for my body and it barely sat below my waist. The waist of the coat was up around my chest. Oh the sight I must have

been. Thankfully hugs weren't really a thing in job interviews because I would have ripped the back to shreds like the Incredible Hulk if I had to reach around anything. My arm looked like it was as rigid as a broom stick with a tragic angle when I went to shake someone's hand.

The best interview that completely shattered my soul was at a church. No less than 15 board members or deacons or clergy or whatever they were sat in front of me. Surrounding a majestic conference table that Jesus himself must have had sermons around. I'm pretty sure I sat in the first desk chair ever made. *And on the 7th day, the corporate cubicle office chair was sent from the heavens to the gray and dimly lit tombs which many a dreams would die in.* Except for this chair would have three legs. Have you ever seen a three legged dog? There's not much grace and elegance in that stance or stride. I would have to balance myself and think of answers to questions that were so far above my head I wasn't sure if I really obtained a college degree or not. Maybe it was all a sham or a scam because I couldn't recall a damn thing. At least not what they were talking about. My jacket was too tight, my pants were too short, my socks were too thin and my older church shoes gave up on life many years before. If that wasn't enough, my words got stuck in my throat like a clogged drain and for the life of me I forgot I even had a damn brain. As terrified as I was, all these men were quite the gentleman about it all. Nothing but positive and uplifting things to say. I didn't get the job of course, and I really didn't realize until many years later just how kind these guys were. They could have shredded all the confidence I had left and kicked me out, the drained and dead shell of myself, but they didn't. There would be many opportunities in life

for me to experience that form of corporate verbal abuse. However that is for another day and another time my friend.

After that interview was another string of lifeless and hopeless interviews. Office after office, suit after suit, Old Spice handshake after handshake. I firmly believed that my life was over, my career was completely over and I wasn't even a year out of school yet. I would call back one interviewer and practically beg for an opportunity to work there. I could hardly get the words out but my broken words matched my broken soul and I was on my knees begging into the telephone for a chance.

"Please just give me a chance. I promise you won't regret it. I will work harder than anyone you have ever hired, just please give me a chance. All I need is a chance!", as my voice quivered through the static on the line.

I was once again so tired. So very very tired. I could barely make ends meet working at the grocery store. Some months, no matter how hard I worked, those ends just didn't meet. Thankfully banks would give me credit cards though. At least that is what I thought at the time. Whenever you think something is for your good and can help you, most of the time it will be the thing that enslaves you.

I ended up at a small firm with only a handful of employees there, it was far from the big three, or was it big four, hell I get it confused with the heavy metal Blu-ray I have somewhere. I mostly just did grunt work and mostly just entered in things to a computer. It was far from the brain melting, hard hitting, fast paced merging of corporations I thought it would be. Mostly a bunch of tax returns and making sure rich people had access to a few thousand dollars for the weekend, just fun money you know.

I hardly ever saw the owner of the place. I think he liked for people to think he was much more well off than he was. He drove a twenty year old Mercedes and I'm pretty sure those vintage suits he had on were from the fine tailor of JC Penney. Of course there is nothing wrong with that but I'm pretty sure that mustard stain on his jacket was from a corn dog he ate 4 years ago at the state fair.

I could smell his breath as he came in everyday. The smell of desperation and regret. Shame and sorrow mixed with yesterdays cigarettes. He was a Benson and Hedges man, smelled like a mildewed version of the mint gum my dad would chew. I'm not sure how much his clothes would see a dry cleaners, I'm guessing around the same number of times he saw his children.

I would just do what I was told. I kept my head down and my fingers flying, I really did enjoy the ten key. It was like a little race to see how fast I could key the numbers in. I felt like a super hero hearing how fast the keys were clacking and smacking watching the numbers fly through the screen. Super Data-Man. Fueled by Folgers coffee and store brand cereal bars. Super Data-Man could enter your tax return at the speed of light. I couldn't process it though. They didn't exactly trust me to finalize things, but I had a job at least. That made my parents proud, I was a working man.

I'm not a forensic accountant. Hell, I'm not even a good accountant. More like a overqualified bookkeeper or data entry, but that's not the point. I'm pretty sure the owner is stealing money from the business and clients. I can't prove it but I can sense it. I know he's overextended on many loans. He's late on his car payment. He parks in the back parking lot with his car backed all the way up to the building so you can't even read the license plate. His ex-wife is

always asking him for money. Hell his kids drive better cars than he does, not sure who is paying for those. I know he has at least five credit card companies on his ass and the bank is calling non stop asking if he is in.

There's not enough people in the office to gossip. He has is friends in the top spots watching over a couple of us data pushers. I'm pretty sure they are crooked as hell also. It's not my business though, I just hope he has enough money in the accounts to make payroll. Sometimes it's a few days late, but thankfully it always came. For awhile anyway.

None of the other local firms would do business with us. We couldn't even transfer clients to them. They wanted nothing to do with us. We were the shunned. The scarlet letter was upon us. The damned of the bean pushers. I knew I couldn't transfer to another firm. I didn't know how the hell I would get out of this place. I just hoped nothing I was doing would be considered illegal by the feds. Maybe they would just think I was just too stupid to know what was going on. Hell I didn't have any authority anyway, so surely I wouldn't have to do fed time.

IX.

When you grow up, you can be anything you want to be. That's what all the teachers said, keep in mind these were the same teachers that said all the pilgrims and indians sat around the dinner table on thanksgiving and had one big fun party were everyone was happy and gay.

I thought it all was true. These were the experts after all. You couldn't become a teacher unless you were an expert on what you were teaching. These are the best of the best.

Alright, I'll stop with the sarcasm. I did, however, think that hard work would pay off. More so I thought a degree would pay off, even though that is not why I went to college, we already discussed that, no reason to repeat myself.

I ran into a old college friend of mine one day at lunch, he was in a nicely fitting suit with shoes that looked more like they came off a showroom floor at a car dealership than a shoe store. The shine was ridiculous. We were the only two people in the accounting program that came straight out of high school. Most of our classmates were much older and already working full time jobs. They were either looking for a better life or needed the degree for a shoo-in promotion. Either way our school boy faces and more junior high humor was looked down by the other "adults". We didn't have a

choice but to bond in reality. He was more of an extrovert and adopted me as his introvert sidekick. We became rather close during this time. Shared stories of high school horror and dreams of what we could be one day. He started to really make me think that anything was possible. If I worked hard, I too could find my dream job. I actually graduated a semester before him, I completed all the necessary courses in time, he was lacking a few more hours. I had the head start of my life.

While I was searching for a company that would give me a head start, his dad called in a favor. He went straight into one of the top firms in the state. He was promoted there in record time. The funny thing is, he usually cheated off me in class. I wasn't a superstar accounting student, not even close, so that should tell you something.

"Hey man, what's up? Long time no see bud!", he said.

"Oh not much, just taking a quick lunch, gotta get back to it soon."

"Did you hear, I'm the CFO at Country Fixin's now."

How in the hell would I hear that, I thought, it's not like they do state wide announcements on TV for boring jobs like accountants. Anyway.

"Man, that's awesome. Congratulations. I see you are killing it.", trying not to sound like a complete jealous dick.

"I better run man, got a meeting soon. I just love the art of the deal ya know. Oh what a rush!", he said as he walked out the door.

I know I shouldn't have been jealous. I know. I didn't want to be. I really didn't. I tried so hard to be happy for him. He really is a great guy, he's everyone's friend and he can light up a room. I couldn't. I'm more of the black hole type, sucks everything containing life right out of the room.

For the next few weeks, nothing felt real. It wasn't that I should have had the CFO job, God knows I was not prepared, not even in the least. Could you imagine me a CFO. The head of accounting for the number one locally owned hot sauce company.

“How's the hot sauce Mr. CFO?”

“It's Grr..r.r.rrrr.rr.r.r.rrrr.....rrrr..rrr....ea.ea..ea.e.a..ea..tt”, like a mix between Porky Pig and Tony the Tiger. I know I said I wouldn't spell out my stuttering like that, but hey I go for effect you know. I can make fun of myself all I want. Just because I stutter does not mean I can't see the downright vicious comedy that exists in it.

Later I found out his father was in a fraternity with the owner of Country Fixin's. It wasn't that I was surprised that it worked like that in the world. It was more the same type of thing when a kid learns Santa isn't real. It's not a big surprise but a little part of you dies once you know that. You can't even go on pretending you believe that anymore.

Looking back now, I'm happy he did so well for himself in life. I watched from afar though after that. I kept up with all his achievements in the paper and newscasts that had him talking and giving his opinion on public matters of various topics. He was just a really like-able person. If I had great connections, I would have wanted that same type of treatment. If you say you wouldn't want that, you don't have any ambitions or are extremely full of shit. Use all the connections you can, someday all that runs out.

X.

I got tired of going to busy restaurants for lunch everyday. I spent all day around people I didn't care to be around, I needed a break, not only from work, but from people in general.

There is a nature park in the middle of town. It's not as grand as Central Park, not in a long shot. It's more like a tiny portion of the shitty part of Central Park. It's green but not like good healthy green. The trees are pretty much replants and the trees that were already there were just pitiful little unhealthy copies of a copy of a copy of a tree that was kind of sort of healthy. The "pond" in the center is a drainage ditch. The area was bad to flood, so before they could put all those big business's around, they had to solve the flooding. Well, flooding is not too big of risk anymore, but the drainage pond still sits front and center. It had a nice water feature in the middle of the pond that was fun to watch but it broke. I think it sucked a duck up in it and sprayed blood all over the pond. At least no kindergarteners were there for a field trip. The senior walking crowd got such a view though. One poor bastard started running around saying "Jesus is Coming," over and over. Must have thought it was some biblical thing. I wonder whatever happened to that guy. Hopefully he made it through the ordeal okay.

All these trees, or most of them anyway, have a piece of wood attached to the trees with huge screws, stabbing into the tree, telling

you the latin name of all these trees. *Bigassimus-Woodimus*, or something like that. Can you tell, I don't like the signs. Where the hell in nature do you see a tree with a name tag, this isn't Kinko's, people. It's a nature park that is more like a diorama science fair project, more kin to a wax museum than true nature.

What is nice about this place is, it's quiet. After the bloody pond incident, it hasn't been near as busy during the weekdays. I can go there at lunch and get some peace of mind. I don't have to fake smile at people or tip the shitty waiters for sub par service. Now don't go thinking I don't tip well, I do. I also expect some halfway decent service, like one refill would be good. Just one Tony, is that so much to ask. Anyway.

I started carrying my journal out there to write but I couldn't really think of anything to say. My mind was too tired and craved something far more meaningful than regurgitating the events into a notebook like that of a junior high prom queen.

What I did notice is that I craved to write more than just what I saw. I wanted to write what I felt, what I felt deep in my soul. What common words just couldn't say. This was no confessional, this was a uprising of my mind to unleash something far more than documenting this day to day rat race. My mind craved to be much more than a machine. I'm not a fucking computer that just exists to make you money. I am a person damnit! Let me say what I have to say like only I can say it. Do not show me just another quiet common man. Do not show me just another follower. Be much more than a follower, be the true observer you are. Be the thinker you are my boy. You are begging to be something more than normal. You are begging to be a poet!

XI.

Okay so I did a thing. I know it wasn't the most responsible thing to do but I couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't take living paycheck to paycheck worried about getting fired or going to prison for that shady firm. No one respected me there, hell I didn't even respect myself. No one should have to decide at 18 what they want to do for the rest of their life. That is the ultimate setup for failure or an early grave for sure. I thought about putting in a two weeks notice but you don't seem to get any notice when you are terminated in today's job market. I love the word terminated, it makes it sound like you are being put to death, yet it's the more respectable term for getting fired. They don't use the words let go much because that's not clear enough for people I guess.

For some reason my manager lacks the skill and coordination to make coffee. That must be the reason because why else would a grown ass man ask someone else to make their coffee for them. I'm not a barista, I've never worked at Starbucks so why the hell would I be any better at making coffee. I've never been one to much stand up for myself, hell remember girls were my bully. I couldn't even get picked on by the big bad jocks, not even worthy enough for those atomic wedgies and Super Bowl swirlies, which had nothing to do with football I might add. More in the porcelain bowl department but

I digress. Anyway, I just couldn't take it anymore. It was the last straw, the last stirrer, the last pot if you will.

I started this great pot by not changing the coffee filter, in fact there was about three pots already made with this one filter. I just kept adding more fresh grounds to the pile. This time I added two more scoops, I wasn't sure if it was even going to brew there were so many grounds in there. I started the pot, it was leaking all down the sides but some was getting into the pot, enough for one glorious cup anyway. After a minute or so of spitting and sputtering, I had the base of the most beautiful cup of coffee I would have ever brewed. I searched around the cabinets a bit for the secret additive to this cup. I finally found it in the back of one of the cabinets, I'm sure its been there for a few years. Good ole table salt. He preferred extra powder creamer in his coffee, most of the time I would oblige and try to make it to his taste. This time however it was special, I put about a quarter cup of salt into the mix, stirred it real nice and promptly delivered his cup of coffee.

"What the FUCK!", I heard from the next office. "What the hell is in this coffee! It's terrible!"

"How about you make your own fucking coffee you arrogant, lazy needle dick piece of shit!", I exclaimed from my office. For the first time taking a stand for myself against these entitled bastards that think they are better than everyone else.

"This behavior is unacceptable. We do not conduct ourselves this way here. We are professionals and we should act like it. I'm not sure what the outcome will be of this...", the owner was saying.

"Stop right there you crooked motherfucker, I'm tired of your old bitter slimy ass and you can go fuck yourself." Seemed like a fitting

exit. I guess I didn't need that two weeks notice anyway.

I went to my apartment, packed up some clothes, packed some camping gear, some shelf stable food and dry goods and packed the trunk of my car. The furniture in my apartment was falling apart, my TV was about 20 years old so I sure as hell wasn't moving that antiquarian behemoth.

My Toyota Prius was new enough and reliable enough, it should keep me for a few days. I was about ten days late on rent anyway, there was no fixing this fast enough. The landlord was a slumlord anyway, that place was a fire hazard and death trap if anything would ever to have happened. Now it was my time to follow in the footsteps of one of my idols, Christopher McCandless. It was now my time to venture, into the wild.

The town I lived in was a dying town. Buildings littered the landscapes resembling scabs of a time gone by rather than a bright future. Time machines into the 1970's and 80's. Indoor malls scattered about, office parks, old factories, abandoned hotels filled with the people society rather forget. There was no shortage of places to urban camp. Police wasn't a concern because they were extremely short staffed. The bigger threat was crime. The land of the free is most definitely not free. In God We Trust, In Cash We Lust. If you turn your back on enough people, those people will inevitably put a knife in it and steal your wallet. At any rate, it was truly survival of the fittest and the most conniving in the dirty south. We are known to be the hospitality state, but we are also the poorest state. I'm not political, I just have eyes and a brain.

I landed an overnight stocking job at a local big box conglomerate. The big blue discount store that would sell their soul and all their

children to have the market share Amazon has. It was easier to sleep during the day anyway. Less chance of getting robbed and no one really thinks anyone is squatting during the day.

My manager was a kid out of high school trying to move up the ranks. Turnover was sky high, no one stayed more than six months. Hell the store manager wouldn't stay more than a year. Get that huge sign on bonus then get the fuck out when that first contract was up. That wasn't a standard contract, that was more a money contract. They would have to pay back the sign on bonus if they left within the first year. Hell, I wasn't there two weeks and they asked me if I wanted to be a supervisor. Could you imagine someone like me supervising people either way younger than I was or those old enough to be my parents.

I would say as little as possible. I preferred just keeping my head down and my hands busy. The stocking was easy. I worked circles around most people and the only reward I got was more work. I liked to be busy though. I liked the simple task of putting the product on the shelf. It let my mind have the freedom to wander. I would get lost in my own thoughts as the night went on.

One of the super annoying things was when we were to get home office company. Geez, these managers would track tail numbers of private planes coming out of Arkansas and somehow know these were the executives on the way. It was ridiculous, you would have thought the pope was about to make a grand entrance. I never understood why they would announce themselves before a visit. Turns out the district managers would always get a heads up from someone if the VP's were coming. Kind of defeats the purpose of a surprise visit if you have a weeks notice doesn't it.

I'd work a couple hours overtime everyday, get a few extra dollars in the bank account. A little cushion was nice. I often parked my car within walking distance to a Planet Cardio fitness facility. The ten dollar a month kind where everything smells like a mixture of piss and sweat. The showers were nice enough to use and every Saturday they would have free pizza for all the members. It was really strange to me how a gym would give away free pizza, but I enjoyed it. My gym was at work. I got in pretty decent shape, pretty fast doing the ole stocking routine every night.

The library was also within walking distance to where I would park. I know I lived in my car but I didn't want to drive it too far out the working radius in case it broke down. This was not only my car but my house. I enjoyed checking out books and reading more. I had no TV. I hated looking at my phone all day trying to watch something on a tiny screen and I needed to be virtually silent during the day anyway. Books quickly became my best friend. Oh I know you are but truthfully you never have much to say. I can't keep the conversation going all the time, I hope you do understand.

I would find myself going through phases of reading and then a phase of writing. If my mind was in the creative mode, I had to let that out. I had to let the words flow through the universe through me onto the page. If I didn't I would feel this unwavering anxiety and panic. I wasn't creative so much as only a tool for the great creator to work through. You can't tell me an artist didn't design the sunset and sunrises. You can't tell me an artist didn't design the Grand Canyon and all the beautiful trees in the world. We are all artist, we are all children of the great creator.

Poetry was my creative mode of choice. I could paint a picture

with only my pen and a piece of paper. It was only a snapshot. A snapshot of a feeling or a time or a hope or a dream. A poet can live a thousand lives in the span of a year. A poet can dream the greatest dreams in the matter of half a night. I've fallen in love with a thousand hearts and grieved a thousand deaths of those the world has never known, yet I knew them as closely as my own family and friends. Sometimes more. I didn't have to share my special friends. I didn't have to compete with other people, they were only true to me, and that was perfectly okay. A memory doesn't stay with you as if it was a file on a hard disk, a memory has to be painted and created each and every time we recall that memory, eventually it gets all muddled up and we can't see it anymore. It becomes a pure work of fiction if we recall it enough. A home movie that never was. A blockbuster only for you.

XII.

Three years since I've last talked to you old friend. I'm sorry it's been so long. I got caught up in the lives of my other friends, then my world went dark and small. I don't really know who I am anymore, but I do know I am sorry.

I'm not sure why but it's easy for me to just cut contact with people. Maybe it's because I never feel like they have any interest in me anyway. Maybe I feel I'm just not worthy of true friendship and any kind of love. It's enough to just be in my head. I'm a lot to deal with for myself.

Every day is exactly the same now, everyday is just a copy of a copy of a copy. Deteriorating a little at a time. Another tiny cut in my soul every day that I have to clock in and stock. Every few months another manager comes through the door and little by little I watch them die.

All are filled with hopes and dreams. Dreams of a better life where they are able to take good care of their family and provide. The American dream, the perfect life with a white picket fence and 2.5 kids. A loving spouse that welcomes them home everyday after a long hard day. The salaries these managers make may seem like a good deal. The truth is however, they have to work more hours than ever before and end up making less per hour than the people they

supervise.

It was a cold chilly night in December walking in to work. The air cut a little more than normal, a slight burn in the throat. This was odd for December in the south. It's either 80 degrees or 40 degrees, not much of a middle ground normally.

I could see the blue lights surrounding the car in the back part of the parking lot. I thought loss prevention stopped another shoplifter, it was curious to see them in the parking lot though. Maybe they called the police before they exited the building, they do that sometimes. I guess I missed the ambulances or they showed up after I walked in but I overheard a group of people talking about the ambulance and a body that was loaded into it all covered up. Surely they didn't see that. Surely it was just someone who wanted to make a scene and start some drama. Overnight workers are of another breed, they live to stir up some drama.

We were all sitting in the break room waiting for the overnight manager to arrive to give us our pep talk or ass chewing, depending on the performance of the previous night. It was about 30 minutes and no one walked in. This was very strange, there was not a minute to waste on stocking. We barely had enough people to get even halfway close to finished every night.

About that time we see the store manager walk in, he looked like he had just seen a ghost. Maybe the VP's were coming in the morning and he was concerned about his job. That had to be it.

"Go ahead and go to the areas you all normally work at, we will have a mandatory meeting for all associates in two hours.", yeah they called us associates, that was a slap in the face, we sure as hell weren't paid like business associates. We knew what we were,

temporary help, even though we were full time.

That was very odd, I had never heard of anything like that. They probably just fired the manager before hand or she called in and told them to fuck off right before her shift started. No biggie. That's the way it was, another manager would start the next day I'm sure.

Another bright eyed, bushy tailed eager little beaver.

I noticed employees talking near the front door.

"That's her car.", "How is her car here but she isn't here.", "That was the car they got the body out of.", all the speculation and story telling, I did mention they loved to keep up some good juicy gossip. I saw more and more managers walk in that I had never seen before. All with home office badges on. All looked scared shitless like it was about to be a mass execution or something. I didn't really mind all the commotion, it was way more exciting than a normal night. We had some action going on. It sure beat the normal day in day out stuff and no one even really even cared what was getting worked to the shelf.

We all returned to the break room, eager to find out what the hell was going on. The store manager, district manger, and loss prevention district manager all walked in the room. I could tell the store manager had been crying. This dude didn't give a fiddlers fuck about anyone and here he was crying. They must have really ripped his ass.

"It is with a sad heart that we have to announce, Tia will no longer be joining us at work here. I will continue to read the official company statement at this time.", the store manager said.

"Approximately 9:20pm, overnight manager Tia Brown died by a self inflicted gunshot wound while siting in her personal car in the

parking lot of store 365. She was a integral part of the team and a dedicated manager. Our hearts go out to her family and three children. There will be a company mental health counselor here tomorrow night for anyone wishing to speak to someone about this. You are free to use your PTO for tonight if you need additional time off. Also we would like to encourage you to sign up for the free 90 day trial of the Calm app to help through this trying time.”

“Please do not speculate and spread any kind of rumors amongst yourselves and other store associates. The gossip policy will be strictly adhered to as well as the speaking to the media policy. You do not have permission to speak to media regarding this matter and if you chose to do so, could result in termination. These policies will be strictly enforced”, said the loss prevention manager.

“Again if you have PTO and need the rest of the night off please enter it now. If not, please return back to work. The regular attendance policy still applies.”, said the store manager before he walked out of the room.

Fuck, that’s it huh. The company did not want the media attention directed at the store so they made no effort to create a memorial at the front of the store for the manager. The following night there was a replacement and everything went on like nothing ever happened. No news on the TV, nothing in the paper. Tia was replaceable and disposable to the management team and to the company. No member of management attended the funeral due to inventory being in two weeks. There simply was no time to stop. Time marches on, right over the memory of a human life.

Retirement for my generation is a fantasy. A relic of the past that no longer applies to this world. Not for anyone. There is no golden

watch anymore, there is no pension, no big retirement parties before they embark on the cross country tour in their newly purchased RV. Leaving the kids to watch over the house while they explore the great Midwest.

Retirement is a lie told by the government and corporations to keep people marching to work day in and day out. Companies refuse to pay a living wage then have the balls to tell their employees their pay is within the national average. What the hell does that even mean? If I can't pay my rent and keep food on the table, what does the national average have to do with me. Fifteen dollars an hour is bait. It's not fifteen dollars for forty hours a week. That's for about twenty hours or less. Full time is only for management for the most part. I was lucky to squeeze into full time before I started but I damn sure wouldn't consider myself lucky. I can only have money in the bank because I have no permanent residence. I live in a Prius that is definitely showing it's age, so I'm not sure how much longer I will have a single cent to my name. I'm not sure how long I can do this anymore.

If I don't leave this town now, I'm going to die here. I'm going to be found dead in my car in the same parking lot were Tia died. That is my only future in this town. The fact that I have not been killed, robbed, or carjacked yet is quite frankly shocking in this area.

XIII.

I have to go now. I have to get out of this damn town. I took my car to the oil change place in the store, got a new battery and some new tires. It's time to hit the road. Well after I go get some gas I guess.

I stop at the gas station around the corner and there's a guy sitting outside asking me if I had any change. I don't make it a habit to give out cash, mainly because I don't have enough to spare. Normally I just say I don't have any and keep on going but this day something in me felt the need to say something else.

"If you are hungry, I'll buy you something to eat here."

"I prefer cash brother.", the man said.

"Last chance, good food and some company for a bit", not sure where that came from, that's not like me to ask for company. He could obviously hear the stutter in my voice, I guess he felt a bit more comfortable with me then.

"Well if you insist, I won't turn down the gentlemanly offer." The man said as he got up and straightened his tattered yet put together clothes. You could tell he did not like not being as clean as he could be. He wasn't use to this.

"Well what do you do for a living?", the man said.

"Oh, I was an accountant, then I worked at the store around the

corner. I'm not sure what will be next.", I said.

"Get fired did ya?"

"No, just couldn't take it any longer ya know.", realizing I didn't even ask about him yet. "What do you do?"

"Well you are looking at it now. I worked in telephone communications for twenty-five years. We were the largest telephone company in the United States. Oh look at me saying we. There was no we. There was them and then there was me. I was used to the paychecks. I was married with two kids, a wife. I had it all for along time. We liked the finer things in life and the paychecks felt smaller and smaller over the years. I was in a prison and didn't even know it.

The kids went to private school. The wife stayed at home. My parents needed some support at the end with doctors bills and nursing home expenses. Money goes fast these days.

The company hired a consulting firm to assess the expenses and productivity cost associated with doing business in this new world. Telephone companies were changing and times were changing. I just didn't think I was changing.

7500 people were laid off, and as you might guess I was one of them. I lost it all. I was of no use to anyone anymore so they just picked up and left. The wife found a new husband and they lived happily ever after."

I could see the tears behind his eyes. I could hear the pain in his voice. He lost all the tone in his voice and put his head down, eating the gas station chicken and tater logs I bought him. If you were raised in the south and were a man. You were told the value of hard work by every old man you'd ever come across. You grew up believing that the man had to provide. I could tell eating a meal I

paid for in front of me was getting to him.

“Hey mister” he said. “Man to man, I just need a beer ya know. It’s been a hard day. Could you spare...”

“Yeah hold on.”, I pulled out a twenty from my pocket and said here ya go bud. Sometimes life is just too hard to go through and you need an escape. Look hard enough at your life and you will find your vices. Even if that vice is exercise, you have something you do to take your mind of this world at times. It’s the poor and homeless that are hopeless alcoholics. The rich men who drink a bottle of bourbon a week, well they just need to unwind.

Life is not what you deserve. Life is pure chaos. A storm that you have to walk through. You may make it to the other side and see some sunlight or you may not. The end is the same for all of us, just we don’t have any real idea how that chapter is going to go, do we. We just pray it’s a quick and boring chapter in reality. We love to read about tragic endings but no one hopes to experience one in real life.

XIV.

Humans are pretty predictable in a lot of ways. We go to work, then we entertain ourselves for the rest of the day. Our days off are the days we tend to really get lost in adventures and try to push away the grim reality of that report being due when you return to work or calling that one client that was never ever satisfied.

We have the humans that need and love to consume art. Then we have the humans that need to produce it. Each needs the other and each is as different as they can come. If you ask artist for a painting that will match their couch, they will probably tell you to fuck off. Unless you are stinking rich, well they will gladly take that money off your hands and produce something that is a joke to them every time you look at it. As different as either side is, one thing remains the same. We need art to keep from going completely and totally insane. If we didn't have art, music, movies, books, poetry, etc., humans wouldn't be able to stand the utter sorrow this world will serve up to us on a daily basis. Death is coming my friend. He's just waiting for you in the shadows. You can just wait to meet him or you can laugh in his face and dance to the bitter end.

We have art in order not to die of the truth, according to Nietzsche. I live in a area where there is a church on every corner. I'm not saying that is necessarily a bad thing, it's just a truth in the south.

Some people like to go to confess their sins. Some like to go to punish themselves for impure thoughts. Some like to go to feel morally superior to everyone around them. Now I'm not going to really get into the weeds on what I believe, mainly because I don't care what your opinion is, just as you don't care what my opinion is. I will say this though, religion is a form of art.

Hold on. Don't burn the book just yet, this is more of a thought experiment than a hard fact argument. Just think about it for a bit. You don't have any real proof that anything you read in any kind of bible for any kind of religion is actually true.

These stories are some of the greatest stories ever told. Filled with beauty and hope. Filled with joy in the afterlife and the joy in the hardships of this one. I've seen people who lost a loved one, still filled with hope and joy because their husband is in heaven waiting on them. Or the children who were miscarriages, are in heaven with Jesus waiting for you to return. There is undeniable beauty in these messages.

My mind is not my friend, so it's not always like that in my head. I have the curse of hard logic at times and at other times I believe in miracles with all my heart. Both are me, and both are the essential truth to who I am in this world. The contradiction of being a human in this day and age.

Even past the stories, look at all art in the churches. The buildings, the stained glass windows, the songs, the books themselves from a time when books were made with great artistry and care. Unlike today were you read your books on a little device to save room in your house for more important things, like Amazon boxes stacked up in the corner unopened because you bought it at two in the morning

but don't really want it and can't bring yourself to return it.

I love religious art myself. It's truly some of the most beautiful images to me. Maybe it's because it's just nice art, or maybe there is something more my eternal subconscious is telling me. Maybe the truth lies so far beyond science and logic that it almost seems absurd. Who are you to say there is no God?

Anything that gives people joy and adds value to their life is an essential part of this experience we call life. If you just can't look at religion as the truth then look at art from this point of view.

Art is what separates us from the beast we were born to be. We aren't just normal animals in the landscape of this Earth. We are the worst animals that were ever created.

A tiger is a tiger. You know a tiger can rip you apart with ease. You know a tiger will attack you if he decides to do so. There is no mistake to this. Yet a tiger can only bite you or maul you or claw at you. There are only so many ways a tiger can kill you. A tiger can't kill six million other tigers if they chose to. We can.

We will look straight in someone's face and convince them they are safe, then viscously murder them in front of their family. If God is man made, you better believe we are the devil in every way. I myself don't believe in a vengeful God, but you better believe I believe in the devil. I see him everyday in this world. Every single fucking day the devil is alive.

So we refine ourselves and act as if we are not simple beast wandering the open landscape of this planet. We speak in certain ways. We attend school to prepare us for adulthood, or so they seem to think. We eat off fine china and have 10 forks to eat 5 different things with. We place our napkin in our lap. We keep our elbows off

the table. We dress in proper attire and keep our tiddly bits covered at all times. A burp is unladylike and yet a signal of male dominance for a man, or so some Neanderthals seem to think. We cut our hair into shapes to signify how cultured we are. Women paint their faces and cinch the waist to look more attractive and more debonair. Oh the parlor tricks we create to hide the fact that we are mere animals on this planet. We may not see blood in the supermarket anymore but you better believe you still have blood on your hands and dead bodies piled at your feet. To simply survive is to take the life of another, in some form or fashion, you are a hunter and the world is what you hunt.

XV.

Have you ever had a dream and woken more confused than you should be at 4 o'clock in the morning. Not really knowing what you just experienced. It made no sense whatsoever. It's easy for us to look at dreams and write them off as just nonsense but yet we can't do that with life. We easily attribute meaning and grand design to what we experience in this life. We easily feel that it was God's plan when thousands of people had to die in a natural disaster or it was the result of free will when the World Trade Center was attacked. All part of a large picture that we just can't understand.

You know what I can't understand, why is it that one the holiest and kindest people I have ever met in life was attacked by cancer and nearly lost his life, he still very well could any day now. Yet people by the hundreds kept telling him how good God is.

I can't understand why a boy driving to his favorite college with his whole life in front of him had to be ejected from his car on a highway and ran over three times. I still see his father at his gravesite at times. Many people left this town for bigger and better things but I stayed a bit too long in this town. For some its worse, they never get to leave.

I can't understand why a two year old dies from a fentanyl overdose while their parents were passed out on the couch. I could

fill a thousand volumes with such tales and over and over I keep hearing, God is good. God and I have an understanding, I'm going to criticize him a bit when I feel like it. If He created this brain, well it's his fault I have such a smart mouth.

If you've never read Soren Kierkegaard or Albert Camus or Fyodor Dostoevsky, stop what you are doing and go read them now. Don't get me wrong, they will not give you the answers you so desire. Nothing on this planet will give you the answers, well maybe a sunset will in its own way.

I was far too locked in my way of thinking before I found these guys. My philosophical and spiritual self was pretty much etched in stone at this point. It was more the validation that I received by reading these guys. I could see how much alike we all were. That idea didn't give me answers but it gave me a philosophical family.

It's absolutely absurd to think this entire universe was made just for the people on this little rock hurling through space. We are so apart from anything else, if the planet blew up, it would affect nothing else around us. Well maybe the moon, I'm not a scientist so it's all a guess, but I think I'm right about the matter.

This planet itself is seventy percent water. If I had to make a guess for who this entire planet was for, well it's clearly for the fish. At least they can live in the stuff. We can't even drink the dang water!

That may send some people spinning into an existential crisis, yet that gives me comfort. Our time on this rock only has a purpose if we give it one. We are the ones that decide what our true purpose is. Even if we decide what our purpose is, that doesn't give us any more or less time breathing this air. As far the logic in our minds is concerned, this is all a matter of luck. A matter of the absurd.

XVI.

“If we are always obsessed with looking, we fail to see what we are actually looking at. Life is not to be understood but rather lived. This is the only true freedom.”

All my life I have been searching for the understanding of what this life is all about. I recently came across this new mental health diagnosis, I'm pretty sure it's not an official DSM diagnosis. It's called Existential OCD. It's when one is obsessed the meaning of life and derives great discomfort from the condition. I am in no way making light of any true mental health diagnosis. Mental health is a very real issue in this world, very real indeed. If it is truly a condition, well I have that condition as well as the others I live with on a daily basis.

From birth I have been driven to find a path that would give me true understanding of this life. Undeniable truth of why we are here. Well, that truth never came across my eyes. I have studied many philosophies and religions and nothing has fully given me that warm blanket of comfort. I studied eastern religions as a young adult and came to really like the philosophies of Buddhism. It does give me great comfort at times, when my mind allows of course.

What I have come to realize is that the more my head is shoved in a

book, the more I miss the sunsets. The more I miss the birds. The more I miss those little moments that truly tell me that I am alive. Our little minds will never accept or be happy with any level of understanding we can conceive of. We simply are not equipped to know the secrets of this universe. There is no end to that suffering if we insist on walking down the road of factual knowledge.

You can not read about a first kiss in a book and know what that feels like. You can't read about love in a book and feel those butterflies and shortness of breath that first love will fill you with. You have to experience life. There is no understanding in simply trying to search for knowledge. Experience is the only way to close our eyes and be content in the choices we have made. If we long for the embrace of death, we long for the feeling of being alive.

They are one in same, death and this life. You can't have one without the other. There is no immortality in this form, not that we know of anyway. Only Gods can have that curse. It's death on my heals that drives me to create. Drives me to live the thousand live's of a poet.

One day my consciousness will move on, I won't be able to carry anything with me. All I will be able to leave behind, that was truly me, is the words on a page. Your memory of me won't even be accurate, for you see they are edited and altered and digitally remastered in your mind by, you.

I am sinner to some and a saint to others, I am the force of good if you see me through those glasses or I destroyed your life, even though I may not have really known you. You most definitely put me into some box that I can assure you is not me.

XVII.

Whether you like it or not, this world has placed a dollar value on your head. How much you are worth to keep alive through your insurance. How much you may potentially earn through your job. Then the glorious lifetime of paying taxes for the privilege of working. For everyone, there is a dollar amount right beside your name. It's either how much think you own, or how much you most certainly owe. Like I said before, In God We Trust, In Cash We Lust.

We love an illusion, we serve an illusion. We serve the almighty dollar. Hard work pays off. Wrong, hard work helps make another person rich. Do you ever think what would happen to all the student loan and credit card companies if we just stopped paying those high interest fees. Everyone in the entire world, just stop paying those crazy interest rates and insane late fees. Sure it may be an economic disaster but they couldn't put everyone in jail. Sure society may crumble around us when that illusion is broken, but we wouldn't be bound to the chains of money anymore.

Ah, I can see you getting mad my friend. You like your bubble, hell I do too, it gives me time to talk to you doesn't it. This system won't change, not in my lifetime anyway. We are trapped in the chains of the dollar and debt. Even though that is true, we can still live a life of our own. We don't have to pray to the money gods. You

can't participate in it either though, you can't have ten credit cards yet say I don't love money. That's not how it works. You have to truly say, if I have a dollar. All I have is a dollar. If I have nothing, I do not have anything. Are we strong enough for that though? I'm not sure anyone is anymore.

Even though I live in my car, have few clothes, only have enough food for a day or two, I'm still bound by money. I still have a car payment, for a few more months anyway, and it's the law that I have insurance. These few possessions keep me trapped in the same routine. Day after day. Will I ever escape this prison? I think the only escape is the journey we can never return from.

XVIII.

I want you to read a few pages from my journal. I'm not really in the mood to talk right now but I want to share with you what I feel. I don't want to run away from those I care about, I just need some silence right now. Anyway here it is...

When you were born, you were first given a name based on your gender and the culture of your family. Depending on what part of the world you live in, that will limit the name you are given. If you are born in the U.S. to parents from the U.S., your name is probably in English at least. From that point on you are now referred to by whatever they chose for you. Your religion is chosen or lack thereof. If they are ultra-political, you may have a political party assigned to you as well.

All these characteristics are chosen for you like you are character in a video game. Your parents may want you to learn multiple languages early on for various reasons, so they teach you the languages they choose. They may want you to be a cello player early on, so they assign you lessons. They may want you to go to the NFL, so they start drills straight out of the womb. You get the idea. For the first years of your life, your parents lead you and mold you into the little person they want or hope you will be. I'm not saying anything

is wrong with wanting more for your child. Of course you want what's best for you child, but is this freedom?

They are too young to know what they want, that's probably your response and with that I do agree. At what age though do we hand over the reins to the child to be "free"? 18,21,25,30, etc.

At what point do they have complete freedom to choose religion? If you are an atheist and they say they believe in God, will you just say, okay? Or will you try to save them from themselves and lead them to the proper way, the right way?

"You have your way, I have my way. As for the right way, the correct way and the only way, it does not exist." - Friedrich Nietzsche.

Contrary to what you may be thinking, I'm not trying to tell you how to raise your kids, nor am I telling you your opinion is incorrect. What I want is for you to really think on what it really means to be free? At what point are we free?

Are you the same religion as your parents? Are you the same political party as your parents? If not, I'm sure Christmas at your house is a hoot and a half. What beliefs that you carry are one hundred percent your own opinion? Are you such an outcast in your family and friend circle that you are the only one that thinks like you think, probably not. We are tribal animals after all, we like to be around people who think like us.

I think most of us would agree that we all have the right to be free. I would hope no one would want to imprison the mind and thoughts of those you love, or even those you do not love. So how

can we do that?

We must live in a way that encourages others to be free. We must truly see others as equals in every way, spiritually and intellectually. We must value the opinions of our fellow humans just as we value our own. Until every person on this planet is valued as equally as yourself, we will not ever know what true freedom is.

Is this even possible? We have companies out there with the owners family living with wealth that equals that of a small nation yet the workers do not have enough money to pay for simple living conditions. If you do not pay a living wage, your business plan is not good. It's that simple. If you are a Walton, the offspring of Sam, you should be ashamed of yourself and the living conditions of the people that are keeping you rich. Clearly they are not for true equality, they are not for true freedom.

It doesn't matter what political party you are in if you are a politician, how can you say you are for true freedom? You want to make laws that force others to live like you think. The first and only Bentley automobile I have ever seen was that of a Senator. That public service sure does pay good doesn't it, yet our officers are out here with minimal training and virtually no mental health support. Most officers have to pick up extra shifts or take on a part time job just to make ends meet. Career politicians are in office their whole life, with no other form of employment and they retire with millions of dollars if they play the game right. I can promise you, not everyone just makes really good investments. If you are a politician ask yourself, what are you doing for every person in your country? How will you encourage true freedom to all people?

If you hate someone just because they want a better life or they

want to flee from the country they are in, how are you for freedom?
You want freedom for you, not freedom for all.

If you hate someone because of the color of their skin, well I feel sorry for someone as ignorant and just plain dumb as you. I sure hope your children do everything in their power to be absolutely nothing like you.

On the other side, if you only love someone for their thoughts and their actions, how are you for freedom?

Oh the questions that have no answers. How I long for the mind of a child. That is why I say they have true freedom early on in life. They aren't weighed down with these ideas. Albert Camus said in one of his books, the question really is whether to commit suicide or not. He spoke of philosophical suicide. My mind tend to goes the other way and think of this in a physical nature. Please don't misinterpret that line as any kind of permission or suggestion for you. This is just my thoughts in my journal.

The eyes of a child glows so bright and beautiful and will never again be so free as they are in the early days. The eyes of a child gives me hope for the future of this world, they have the power to change this place we created. I couldn't do it, but maybe they can. Maybe one day after I am long gone, every person on this floating rock we call Earth will know what it's like to truly be free. Some say this is impossible, but I say if we can think it, we can make it happen. Isn't that the dream we tell the children today. Isn't that the hope we have for all future generations of this entire world. We are all hurling through space on this tiny little insignificant rock, we have no true borders, we are all the same. We all want to live our life, be happy, and be free. Oh how I want to know freedom.

XIX.

A true individual must walk alone. For a time anyway, maybe not forever. We have to have our solitude to really determine what is important to us. I hope I didn't turn you off with my freedom journal entry. I don't want to turn you away, I just hope to make everyone think a little bit on the subject.

The highway is a funny place. It feels busy. It's fast and rushing and deadly, yet incredibly lonely. Every exit on the interstate looks the same. Gas stations and fast food stops await off most exits. I know when I'm getting in the real middle of nowhere because it's just one truck stop or gas station and I can't see anything for miles. I don't know where I'll end up but I know I'll have to go at it alone.

Was that the true design for my life, to truly walk alone. Take my fluent speech from me to keep me in my own prison. Hell maybe I consider freedom, fluent speech. I think that's why I like to write so much. My pen doesn't catch on my page, it flows freely like a rushing stream down a mountain. I never had writers block, but oh boy do I have speech blocks. A cruel world indeed.

Do you take for granted telling your significant other I love you? Do you ever take time to think about those like me who can't say it, much less have anyone to say it to. I don't mind being alone, that's not a hard thing for me to do. What does mess with me is, the

loneliness. I want my phone to ring and someone on the other end to say, “I love you and I so can’t wait to see you when I get home.”

It’s not the daytime that makes me lonely, it’s the night. More so, it’s the mornings when I wake up. My dreams are relentless. My dreams are savage and cruel. My dreams will show me the love of my life, and then kill them instantly when I wake up. I’ll lay there begging for another second, for another minute, another split second so I too can say, “I love you.”

I can’t hide the truth from you can I? I try to use my logic to convince myself that being alone is the only way. Only true individuals can be alone, ha! I think I’m really good at being an individual. I’ve had lots of practice. Too much practice. Will I die alone? Will I die the quiet and the lonely. Maybe that’s what my headstone will read, here lies the quiet and the lonely. The only way for that to happen though is for me to prepay for my own funeral and that is far far down the list of things I don’t have money to pay for. I wish you were real, maybe you could tell them for me. I know you better than I know anyone, you are all I have really. Too bad you only live in my head. When I die, you die my old friend. We have a pact in that way.

Oh well, to the highway again. Maybe soon I’ll figure out where the hell I’m going. So long old friend, until next time.

Words that may never be read

Poetry and Prose from another time

Hello...

I write these words because I can't say hello. I greet you to mimic a person you know. I'm the mirror you fail to see. I'm silent yet engaged in your conversation but I fail to let you know me. I'm scared you'll laugh and point at me like a circus freak. I know I'm not normal but I don't like it when you call me out. I want to be like you from 9 to 5, then I want my heart and soul to come alive. I write these words because I don't want you to feel so alone. Maybe in finding a friend, you'll feel a bit more at home. More at home in a foreign town surrounded by the army of tradition. You know who you are but you are terrified. Terrified they will break the illusion of comfort in your creations. Comfort behind the walls of complacent contempt. Comfort in the house of hope veiled in the hidden shroud of hopelessness. I write these words because I can't say hello.

Glimpse of Somebody Familiar

I am a glimpse of somebody familiar that you thought you once knew. You can't quite remember my name but you recognize that look in my eye. You've seen it somewhere before. You've seen it in the eyes of a child on a summer day. You've seen it in the eyes of your old family dog when you got home from school. You've seen it in your grandmother when she says she was proud of you.

You didn't stop me as you walked by. You could have sworn you knew me when you looked into my eyes. Maybe I was someone you knew in school. Maybe I was someone your friend once knew. Or maybe I am someone who lived similar to you. A life lived on a parallel plane. A little different but basically the same.

Maybe you felt weird and uncool. Maybe you had your heart broken a time or two. Maybe you thought no one could ever be like you. Maybe you find peace while sitting alone. Maybe you hate answering a phone. Whatever it is or what it could be. You could have sworn you truly knew me.

I'm an artist and all that comes with it

I am artist and all that comes with it. The severe introvert with a need to connect somehow through others with words printed on a page that may never get read. I can't tell you what you want to hear because I can't understand how you function in the vacuum of self absorption. I try to fit in and belong to the crowd that surrounds me but the truth is I'm just a mirror to what you do.

Hiding my soul in a tattered box in the corner destined for tomorrow's trash. I speak to my demons in the morning to keep them in check so maybe I can make it through one more day. One more day in an achievement. One more day is my goal. One more day is what keeps me above ground, one more day. My words aren't meant to be pretty, much like most of the world. Smiling in the morning to hide the darkness at dusk. Keeping the devil quiet through the night. I am an artist and all that comes with it.

Keeping the light on and fire burning until my soul is gone.

The sun laughs as we scamper about
Like a mad man in search of nothing
Running away from a problem
Running to a place of perceived comfort

Getting in our cars to speed to work
Rushing to the timeclock not to be late
Anxiety riddled and lexapro bound
Slaving for a debt where the interest compounds

Did you see the house I built in the burbs
Did you see my new Lexus by the curb
Did you see my new boat in the drive
Working for a image you try to justify

I sigh as people pass me by
Trying to find meaning in a busy life
Trying to find peace in material things
Trying to find happiness from others means

The sun, the moon and the trees
They all know what it really means
But we search for a key trying to be free
Yet it surrounds us all along.

Name tags binding our names
College degrees keeping us in chains
Paying off a debt
that seems to forever remain

The sun laughs as we scamper about
Our minds screaming to let us out

Impatient Son

From the first hours of the day
The light of the world dared to stay

The flickering flame of the newborn heart
Threatening darkness from the start

The nine months that never fully passed
Praying that his fragile world is heavy glass
Heavy as the iron that protects our ships
Heavy are the words passing from her lips

Hope dangling violently by a thread
Slowly engulfed by fear and dread
What did I do wrong, what have I done?
I never meant to hurt you my dearest son

Fighting because I knew nothing more
I have yet to experience what this life is for
Is this a punishment, is this a test
Im not prepared for my somber rest

His life beats through a cold machine
Through his eyes I see an angels gleam
Burning with an unrelenting will to live
Each day I will give all I have to give

Collapse to my knees to rejoice once more
My warrior can battle all that's in store
The bravest I hold in the palm of my hand
Today I'm proud to say my son is a man.

When you see a man and he is crying
That is the most broken sight of all
It takes more than a empty heart
To make a man break down and fall

When you see hope leave his body
And he looks beat beyond it all
Just lend a hand and say keep trying
You are one of his children after all

When you see a man who is breaking
His legs can't hold up the weight
Just sit with him just for a moment
It may be all he can take

Don't let your brother take all the beating
Life can throw us all on the floor
Every soul is beautiful and broken
Every Man has at least said no more

When you see a man and he is crying
That's the strongest man you may ever see
To take another step and keep from dying
The pain will someday set him free

Don't sit and say he's not even trying
He may be fighting as hard as he can be
We don't know another's struggle
But we can show some empathy

So lend your hand and a little time
It may be just what he needs
To let him know to keep trying
Just listen to your heart and believe
Just look inside your heart and believe

A five minute diagnosis
From a preoccupied physician
Too busy to put down his pen
Too busy to try to listen
Shoving a pill down my throat
That stripped away my soul
Master of my own execution
Just a side effect, not the goal

Trapped in a white room
With a particle board desk
Staring at a calendar
Listing holidays I'll never take

Working behind a firewall
Monitoring my phone calls
For better customer service
To ensure my obedient compliance

Investing in an ergonomic keyboard
To match last year's lumbar support
In the coldest light imaginable
To hide the slow passing of time

Midnight looks like morning
As the clock on my desk
Runs slowly almost reversing
The hope of escaping alive

Thank you Mr. Hawkins
For your years of dedication
Sacrificing your family
For the greed of a few

Your services are valued
But no longer needed.
Please leave behind
Any items belonging to us.

We chase the grades for a better tomorrow
We chase the school for a better life
We chase the profession for security
We chase the promotion to achieve

We chase the dream that never ends
Running in circles again and again
We chase for years for a better day
But there is no beginning or an end

Yesterday is a memory playing in our minds
The good, bad, and ugly etched into time
Tomorrow is a gift we hope to see
But for some, they will never find

Don't let the chase become your life
Don't let tomorrow hold all your dreams
Live today for what you believe
Don't live in the illusion of want or need

I'm the old rusted Cadillac
In the middle of the field
I've seen some good times
But a memory doesn't seem real

When I rolled off the line
I dreamed of all that could be
I never knew as the years went by
I would be rusted under this tree

Cruising down the streets at night
With young love in my seats
Looking at the stars above
Life was innocent, joyful, and free

As the time passed by
And the seasons changed
The people that drove me
Were never the same

Now I sit under this tree
Dreaming a dream that will never be
Hoping someone will come along
And see the beauty that lies in me

I'm the old rusted Cadillac
In the middle of the field
I've seen some good times
But a memory never seems real

A poem inspired by a psychedelic experience

A tree is a tree
But he doesn't know he is a tree
He doesn't know what he could be
He's just a tree

He's not like you and me
We can be anything we choose to be
Anything in nature
Is all we are
Just imagine all we could be

I held on tightly for nothing
Only to realize we are nothing
Nothing but empty hopes
Nothing but empty dreams
I held on so tightly for Absolutely Nothing

The alarm clock ringing in my ear
Awoke me from my dreams
Every day is the same before
Is anything really how it seems

On my long drive to work
I pretend I'm in a band
The steering wheel is my guitar
Playing to all my fans

Just when my solo starts
The phone rings in my ear
Boss is screaming in my head
Asking "are you here"

This is no way to live my life
I won't abide by your fear
It's time to get over it
And get the hell out of here

So I head my car to Bristol
Not sure what I'll find
I don't have a business plan
But I found my piece of mind

You'll understand one day
When your time has come
You'll think what I should've did
And then it'll all be done

So live your life your own way
And live it far beyond
How you thought it'd ever be
Remember it's your only one

So head your car for Bristol
Head your heart for Spain
All aboard for New England
And dance a little in the rain

So live your life your own way
And live it far beyond
How you thought it'd ever be
Remember it's your only one

Some Days

Waking up is easy
Getting out of bed is fine
Walking out the front door is paralyzing

To Dream

To dream a dream
That wasn't mine
Dissolves to a thought
That becomes clear in time

The Shade Tree

I dreamed underneath the shade tree
I dreamed I was enjoying the summer day
Walking hand in hand with destiny
Even though destruction was her name

Danger of Living

The danger of living
Comes not from isolation
But trying to predetermine
The outcome of every situation

Drinking my 5am coffee
At half past noon
Tasting the bitter
Procrastination of life

Feeling the familiar
Caress of a cigarette
Breathing in the illusion
That keeps the fire burning

Preparing my mind
To cope with the mindless
Repetition of resistance
For forty hours or more

Panic for productivity
Pain as a profession
Just for more possessions
And the 401k illusion

Someday I can live
Someday I'll be free
Someday I'll retire
Someday I'll achieve

Buy food on credit
For the first 15 years
Paying off the debts
For the next thirty.

When they bury me
You can rest easy
The final price of peace
Can be paid in monthly installments

People are quick to say I don't need you
Because they are too afraid to say don't go.
Building bunkers for their innocence
Keeping the demons at the door

I don't need nobody she screams
After cutting her arm from the broken
Glass she snatched from the broken
Picture frame with his picture in it.

I don't need nobody he screams
After his parents shut him out
From any resemblance of affection
Not knowing what he's about

I don't need nobody she screams
Closing Facebook on her phone
As she slips on the lasso
She hopes will send her home

People are quick to say I don't need you
Because they are too afraid to say don't go
Begging silently to be heard by someone
Longing for family and to belong

A place to feel security
Simple comforts of home
Dreaming of serenity
While sitting all alone

Dreaming of security
Needing to belong

I didn't know I was falling
After I convinced myself to fly
No clue where I was going
But I was soaring so very high

Everyday was like a dream
With a nightmare following behind
Falling in love with an idea
The immortals never die

Thoughts faster than sound
Watching myself from memories
Living a day after the day before
I can't take this shit anymore

I didn't know I was falling
Looking at the ground
My grave coming to meet me
Dying faster than sound

Everyday was like a dream
With a nightmare following behind
Im not sure who's life I lived
Fuck I never meant it to be mine.

Be the fearless rebel of love and compassion.
Don't just follow your neighbors routine
Let's build a world full of love everlasting
I have had enough of the cold and the mean

Watch what we say don't curse like a sailor
Don't get so mad over the trivial things
You're the super hero the cosmic avenger
Be the greatness from your kids dreams

If you can't change the world then you won't
If you can't live from the heart then don't
But don't shake your head at what I'm saying
If you can't be a part of righting this wrong

Be the fearless rebel of love and compassion.
Don't just follow your neighbors routine
Let's build a world full of love everlasting
I have had enough of the cold and the mean

I fell in love with the madness
Warm and cozy in the sadness
I didn't choose to have this mind
Like water life slips through time

It keeps flowing and losing traction
Speeding through the chain reaction
Setting myself up for future disaster
Kicked down to the floor by my silent master

I'm not sure if it was a gift or a curse
It's not too bad being close to the worst
But there's not much light in the deepest hole
It's all contained in the madness of my soul

So I hold it tightly and deeply within me
Hoping that my loved ones will be free
Free from the darkness I hold so dear
I smile back hoping to calm their fear

I fell in love with the madness
Warm and cozy in the sadness
I didn't choose to have this mind
Like water life slips through time

Over time everyone becomes an observer.
Fueled by the remaining memories of before.

Driving alone on the overcrowded roads
Hopefully everyone else is paying attention

As they check their phone for a missed text
Making sure they don't miss a thing.

Making sure they don't miss the one chance
Of redemption they beg for in their sleep.

Not taking calls from their friends
To not miss the call they hope comes soon.

Staying awake so they don't miss
What will come any minute now.

What are they waiting for?
They forgot along the way.

Ignoring the world as they wait.
Forgetting themselves as they wait.

As they she waits alone in the hospital
She realizes the wait is finally over.

I won't insult you by telling you I know how you feel. By telling you the sun will rise again, this too shall pass, it won't rain forever. I won't patronize you in iambic pentameter, trying to show you how sympathetic I am with my words. Trying to use your pain to sell a poem. I can't know your pain. I can't feel your heart. I can't live in the existence of your soul. I wouldn't dare tell you I know how you feel. I'll just be here. I won't try to fix you. I won't motivate you. I won't try to relate to you like a high school chemistry teacher. I'll just be here.

She erupts with rage
As the cashier rings
Tomorrow's groceries
With yesterday's wage

I can't put anything
Back there's nothing left
But my medicine
I can do without

She erupts with rage
Blaming the cashier
Because no one else
Is there to hold her hand

She erupts with rage
As the pressure builds
As the interest compounds
As the postman brings more bills

She erupts with rage
Before she falls to her knees
Broken and battered
But her soul not shattered

She erupts with rage
Because she feels so alone
So alone even at home
Even at home she feels she doesn't belong

I sit listening to the silence
As the wind knocks against the door
As if asking for me to come outside
Come outside and live once more

I sit listening to the silence
As the birds sing my name
Trying to get my attention
Telling me my life won't be the same

I sit listening to the silence
Locked inside on the couch
Locked inside my house
Locked inside my routine

I sit listening to the silence
As my heart leads the way
Not knowing what's ahead
And for once that's ok.

The trouble with this world is
It's a place I don't think I belong
The only problem with that is
It's the only place I can call my home

My life is like a bipolar diary spread throughout the state littering the sidewalks like abandoned posters of last years concerts. Pages fluttering through the wind giving the reader a slight idea of who I am but never the full picture. Sinner, saint, Christian and pagan. If only I knew which one to believe.

I misplace it from time to time
It sings like a morose nursery rhyme
Just one more change and I'll be fine
Excuse me sir have you seen my mind

The moonlight covers her body
As the nights breeze dances in her hair
Gazing at the wonders above
Thinking if she will ever live up there

Lost in time and space
That no one could ever see
Letting go of her worries
Alive in the moment she will be

Breathing in the worldly beauty
And letting go of all the pain
In each passing moment
She will never be the same

Tomorrow is a product of the day before
Only one thing will remain the same
Time, life, and love goes by
But she will always have her name

The beauty that lies within her
Only a lucky few will see
She never needs approval
From you, from anyone, or me

The moonlight covers her body
Her spirit dances in the air
She can feel the love of the world
Her heart and mind, a perfect pair

I threw my watch in the river
I threw my phone in the lake
I've had enough of your deadlines
It was all I could take

We all live for possessions
Living in jobs we hate
Trying to be productive in society
Just trying to be great

I drove my car in the river
I was bound to it's name
Living my life going in debt
This world is driving me insane

We buy into commercials
We buy into this game
We would rather sell our souls
Than to be labeled plain

I sold my house in the city
I'll get on the next train
Going somewhere so far away
Only my heart will remain

I don't work for possessions
I work to have my time
I won't buy into the business
Of giving you my life

I'm done with your commercials
I'm done with this game
From this day I own my life
The future will not be the same

I may not be like you
But I'll help you if you need me
I may not say many words
But I still have a story to tell

This world feels mighty strange
You know me if you feel it
But my heart hasn't changed
It just got clouded in the rain

You may not understand
The space that I needed
It just helps me heal
From the noises from within

I may not be like you
But I'm here, if you need me
I won't leave another
To feel alone in this world

I don't say many words
But each word, I feel it
I may not have caused it
But I feel your suffering

I may not understand
The heartache that brings it
But I'll never turn away
From a stranger or a friend

I may not be like you
Someday I may need you
Sometimes I need
The kind words of a friend

September told me not to come here
But I ignored her when I was gone
She walked beside me on my journey
Like a love struck vagabond

My memories they deceive me
Tell me stories I've never lived
How will I ever remember
Just how much I have to give

In my darkness I see me clearer
Or do I just remember what I've done
Looking back is always easier
Than picking up and moving on

September told me not to come here
But I ignore her when I'm alone
The days gone by I am mourning
Like a hopeless man on the run

The heart beats different day to day
What holds it's attention may not stay
Sometimes the music just goes away
The heart beats different from day to day

We never truly know what the future holds
We like to fool ourselves and hopes it does what its told
Spending endless hours chasing our goals
We never truly know what the future holds

The love of the past may flutter away
Leaving only fond memories to play
Sometimes our love just gets up and walks away
The heart beats different from day to day

Every kiss seals the moment in time
The next one may not be what we hoped to find
We sometimes can't see the end of the line
Sometimes what's left is the memory in our mind

The heart beats different day to day
What holds it's attention may not stay
Sometimes the music just goes away
The heart beats different from day to day

Standing in line waiting for a concert you care nothing about, while a fan sees the sign that says sold out. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and more. Pimping yourself as a social media whore. Fiending for the like and the follow. Maybe I'll hit 10000 tomorrow. The lights go down, the band hits the stage. Excuse me ma'am your phone is blocking the stage. I stand behind you while you use the flash. Sending the post to all your friends in your class. Living your life through the filters on your phone. Hoping your witty post will help you belong. Gotta put the selfie on my Snapchat story. Make them jealous with all your glory. The band leaves their heart on the stage. But all you see is the posts on your page.

Today I'm not myself
I can't bring myself to feel
I know I should tell you
But I'll let this illusion live

You smiled like you forgot
The broke and missing teeth
You smiled like you remembered
Who you use to be

We will run away from here
We will be the biggest stars
Live the life of champions
I'll fly my jet to mars

We will run away from here
Live the life of fame
Live with all the big shots
You'll be proud to hear my name

I know baby girl
I'll see you on TV
We will have it all
You just wait and see

I remember how you smiled
The day we first met
Even after the damaged roads
With us, I'll never regret.

Goodbye my baby girl
I hope you're free of the pain
Someday baby girl
You'll be in my arms again.

From the bottom of the bottle
I see your picture on my wall
When you use to smile for me
Years before my fall.

From the ashes of this cigarette
I remember how you'd say my name
You'd look at me with your big brown eyes
My worlds never been the same

Talking to my old friend misery
Maybe I'm the one to blame
If only I was a better man
You still have my last name

From the bottom of the bottle
To his brothers on the floor
If I only had let you in
You wouldn't be out the door

For a moment when I close my eyes
Like a dream I still see
Your head on my shoulder
You laying next to me

For a moment I can smile
Before my heart breaks again
From the bottom of my bottle
My memories are my only friends.

From the ashes of this cigarette
That burned through your wedding dress
I'm sorry I lied to you
When I said I'll do my best

Do not mourn the poet
After he is gone
He's loved a thousand nights
And dies a little by dawn

The sadness is heavy
And joy sometimes known
Fleeing in the distance
Another love. Another poem.

The heartbreaks bury him
In the depths of his own tomb
Loving a thousand years
Grieving a thousand wombs

Do not cry for the poet
He's lived all he could
Many would give it all
To stand where he stood

Madness.
Or was it sadness
What brought me to you
No remorse for my joy
Or the sadness of you

Insanity.
Or was it vanity
I tried to hold on to
Sacrificed truth
For a beauty of youth

No one to blame
In my hotel of shame
Leaving for the maid
Only she knew the truth

Walking hand in hand
A hundred miles away
But in my hometown
No one knew my name

Don't fall in love in the dark
For the morning will never come
Burying me in my tomb
Of love that once was

Living a thousand lives
Hiding a million lies
Don't go and fall in love
With an angel below or above

Words on words
Songs on songs
Too many creations
Nowhere to roam

My poem is buried
Before I am done
Never seeing the light
Page never torn

Meaningless words
Meaningless songs
Meaningless art
Meaningless home

Never accepted
Never known
Never read
Never belonged

Part II

I.

That was Norma's favorite chapbook of mine. I remember when I gave this book to her. She was at a poetry night I attempted at the store.

"What do we have here, Hemingway?" she asked giving a concerned glance to the simple card stock cover.

"It's a poetry book," I said.

"I figured that, didn't think it was the shortest novel I've ever seen," she says laughing at her own joke. "How much?"

"It's free."

"Don't burn yourself Hemingway, people will never give you a damn thing if you don't ask," She said in her stern yet caring way.

I'm not sure why that conversation sticks out so clear in my mind. It's like it was yesterday. That was some thirty years ago. My car broke down in Born, Mississippi. There was something about this place. I didn't mind being here. The sunset was striking in the evening here. So much so that nearly half the town would drive to the overlook to get a glimpse of its beauty. I think it was those sunsets that convinced me God was real and better yet he had to be an artist. How could you mix colors like that day in and day out and not be a painter.

Even the people were different. I didn't see anyone rush past me

on their phone trying to respond to their boss before they got back to the office. No, this town was not that. There was one movie theater but it only played classic movies and at Christmas they played Miracle on 34th Street and The Gremlins. The town took care of that place more than anything. People pitched in where they could. At the Po' Boy shop I've seen townsfolk help serve when it got too busy at night.

No one moved here but the young people would leave as fast as they could. The older people left too but they left to be with the painter of those marvelous sunsets. It wasn't a place that discussed politics, these people were left behind long ago. No one stopped by there on the campaign trail. The buildings were from another time. Frozen by a stagnant economy yet maintained by a eager and willing community.

When a person passed away, I knew everyone would come together at the church and bring a casserole or something sweet. It wasn't that everyone was so religious, it just had a hall big enough to fit everybody. People can say what they want about the south. When I looked through that great hall, I saw all peoples of the world laughing and talking. Sharing in good food and good fellowship like only in a young preachers dream. Some didn't speak English but their eyes glowed so bright because they knew they had found a home.

Many came here by way of the Darien gap. They watched their wives and daughters get raped on the trail as local militia held a gun to their head. I'd be shocked if most people born here even knew what that was. I can hear it now, if that was me I'd blah blah blah. To many this land is the land of the free and the hope of a better life.

That's how most of us ended up here. Our ancestors wanted more for us.

I didn't know how much I would cherish those times. I didn't know that kind of peace was possible in this world. I felt like I'd gone to heaven in a way. If there is a heaven I sure hope I see all my dear friends again. There's so much wildlife here I wonder if maybe I already have.

Oh my, my mind sure did wander there. I can't help it at times. I hope I don't lose those memories some day. When I broke down here I stayed at the local Stay Inn Motel. I'm pretty sure it had been many things before. I'm sure the prime of it's life was in the seventies. Pretty sure the curtains were original to the period.

I needed a new transmission in the Prius. The local shop told me they would try to find a used one but it would take awhile. I just couldn't afford a new one. Not even close. The car was almost paid off, hopefully I could make the payments. If not, I don't think any repo man is going to find it here.

Many of my neighbors were on government assistance. They could barely get by but they had just enough for the weekly rate, some barely edible food and maybe a bottle of Aristocrat. I didn't like to think of what else they would do. Every few weeks I would see the lights of an ambulance and I knew it had to have been an overdose. I could tell the difference between ambulance and police. How no one burned down the place, I have no idea.

II.

The local drugstore/bookstore/video rental place was looking for some help. I'm not sure who they expected to move into town for the job but I was glad to help while my car was getting fixed. Plus I could use the extra cash. The weekly rate was ripping through my savings. While others had government assistance, Uncle Sam was giving me the cold shoulder.

The books were all used and there was no new releases coming in. Most of the books were from the local library that closed down. They had to close it due to mold and the other branches didn't want the books so they asked the mayor if he could dispose of them, so he gave them to the drugstore to do what they wanted. You could buy a book for eight dollars or rent it for a dollar. I'm not so sure how the library system felt about that but they never came around town after they condemned the library.

The local folk got their prescriptions from the store, that kept the one pharmacist quite busy but it keeps the store open and a few people with jobs. I mainly cleaned and did odd jobs. Make deliveries from time to time. Not many people rented the books and even fewer ever bought anything so they let me borrow whatever I wanted all the time.

The books were my closest friends. I enjoyed working at the store

to pass the time and I got to talk to people more. No one cared that I stuttered. No one would ever finish my sentences for me. They would just listen. As time went on I stopped feeling rushed to talk. I didn't have that fear and shame in me anymore. I felt accepted. I felt normal for once in my life. The more I'd talk the more fluent I would become. I talked really slow and still had moments of blocks but no one would care either way. No one called me porky pig or asked if I was retarded. I hate that word but that is the word people would use at times, although I never heard that word once in Born.

I loved that job but the pay wasn't great at all. That's just how it was. I couldn't keep living in a motel anyway. It was too much financially and too much emotionally. I didn't mind sleeping under the stars at night. It made me feel like a Boy Scout. Every night was an adventure. There was no Planet Cardio there for a shower but there was a creek not far from where I made camp. I had enough to buy food and supplies and that was enough for me. Plus I liked not having to see those death lights at the motel. That's what I'd call the ambulance lights. I knew someone had to be dead if they showed up.

III.

All that worked fine up until Norma pranced upon my camp like the little explorer she was. She discovered my secret spot as much as Columbus discovered America. As I was walking back to my tent after work ready to devour the Po' Boy I just got, I saw her sitting facing my tent. The closer I got I noticed she was painting my tent scene with gouache.

"This your setup," she asked.

"Yeah it's just temporary."

"That's good. Where ya off to next kiddo?"

"I'm not sure yet but I think I might just..."

"Can't stay here. Pack up your stuff," you gotta come with me.

I thought she was about to take me to the police. I thought I would be forced out of town. I put my stuff in her car and we drove. I didn't feel like eating anymore. I didn't know if I was going to throw up or shit I was so nervous. We were going down backroads. Oh, what is she doing? We must be going to the sheriff's house or something.

We pulled into dirt drive with a older mobile home on the hill. Most of the land was cleared but still surrounded by trees and nature.

"If you are going to camp. Might as well do it here. You can drive the old Chevy by the shed. Well that is if you can drive stick. If not I guess you are walking."

“I can drive a manual.”

“Good. It’s three on the tree and don’t fuck it up,” she said with a slight laugh in her voice but not at all joking.

“Why are you doing this for me?” I asked as we were parking.

“I guess I just kind of like you kiddo. You remind me of an old friend when we were younger. A different time I guess,” she said getting lost in the old movies playing in her mind.

That was how I met Norma Jean Faulkner. One of many living artist in the south but one of the few that actually sold a fair amount of paintings. I’d work as her assistant part time and at the store part time. I don’t think she really needed an assistant but she damn sure needed a driver. Anything out of town and she would have a panic attack. I’d never seen anything like it. It was like it was orchestrated by Stephen King. A truly terrifying site. Especially from the passenger seat when she was driving. So needless to say. I started driving her on her out of town trips. That job was formerly taken by Lucy.

Lucy had passed several years prior. It was months into our endeavors that I learned Lucy was not her assistant. She was the love of her life. She never could say much about Lucy. Every time she would try she would get that tickle in her throat and have to stop. I didn’t know much about Lucy but I did know she never left Norma’s mind or heart.

IV.

Every couple weeks we would have to make the trip north to Jackson. Norma sold her paintings all over the world, but all her business dealings were out of a gallery in Jackson. They took care of all the shipping and customer service aspects of her business, just leaving her time to create the actual art. That came more out of necessity than anything else. A client of the gallery called Norma at home one time and asked if she could repaint something with different colors. Norma was curious on why and asked for her reasonings. Well she needed it to match the rug and she didn't want to change the color of the drapes either. I think Norma's response was something to the effect of how about you go to Walmart and get you some finger paint you dirty, mindless, Neanderthal cunt. If Norma's painting didn't sell like they did, I think the gallery would have probably dropped her. Instead of losing all the commission and business, they offered to be her go between for free. Although you can't really say free, they did take a hefty fifty percent from each sale. At Norma's level she could have negotiated better rates somewhere else but she liked the people there and the business side really had no interest to her. All she wanted to do was make art.

On one trip, Norma was more talkative than other times and she started singing, "Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz!"

Joyfully smiling all the way with her signature laugh that would light up any room. It was the most obnoxious laugh ever yet so beautiful as well. Her whole face would light up and damn near glow. I loved to hear her laugh, at least that meant she wasn't crying.

"Oh, she so wanted a Mercedes Benz," Norma shouted. "She didn't care for fancy things much, she didn't wear fancy jewelry or extravagant clothing, but did she ever want a Benz."

I was assuming she was talking about Lucy, I didn't want to interrupt so I just let her talk. I loved when she talked about Lucy, her world would be so much lighter and brighter. You could see she was lost in almost time travel. When she talked about her joyfully, it was somehow like Lucy was in the van with us.

"I was looking for a cargo van to make these trips to Jackson with, ya know something easy to get all the stuff we needed to take back and forth. I hated the Ford vans, pops always said Ford stood for Found On Road Dead. Couldn't have pops turning in his grave could we. Dodge just sounded dumb, Dodge. Dodge, what a dumb sounding name. Dodge." She would emphasize the D and drag out the word mocking the name with each breath.

"It was more by elimination than anything that I landed on buying a Mercedes Sprinter van. It was used but low miles, in great condition and just what I needed. I couldn't help myself, I called Lucy and said, 'Baby, I got you something you are going to love. It's getting delivered in a few hours. I'm at the dealership now. It's what you always wanted baby.' Oh, I couldn't wait to see the look on her face. When we pulled in with that van on the trailer, she busted out laughing. Oh she loved it. She loved the joke more than anything. Every time she would drive it she would emphatically sing, almost

yelling. 'OH LORD WON'T YOU BUY ME A MERCEDES BENZ!' God, I miss her. She made this life worth living ya know. She was so perfect. You two would have really got along," Norma said shifting her mood from joyful to melancholy. I could feel her heart break all over again. It's rare to find a love like that. When you do, you have to hold on to it for dear life. Forever. Just because you lose someone doesn't mean you stop loving them. If anything you love them harder than ever. Keeping that porch light on in your heart so you can see them again someday.

V.

Life was good working for Norma. After a few months of camping outside, she let me move into a spare room in her trailer. I guess she figured she could trust me or she didn't want to have my death on her conscience if I were to die by a lightning strike or something. Just as anything goes up, it must come down.

I got a call from the police up in Jackson. I'll never forget the silence in his voice before he asked me to confirm who I was. I could hear the seriousness and the sadness in his voice.

"Sir, your parents were involved in an automobile accident at approximately 10:35am this morning."

I expected him to tell me what hospital they were at or something but that small hope would quickly sink into my stomach never to return.

"A vehicle in the oncoming lane veered into the opposite lane. There was nothing they could do, sir. It is with a heavy heart that I must inform you..."

I don't know what else he said, or how he said it. This is not how this was suppose to happen. This is not how the story goes. They both were going to quit work at the end of the school year.

Norma could see the loss of life from my eyes. She just wrapped her arms around me and held me. She cradled me so gently yet so

tightly, both of us crying and grieving a loss. It felt like hours we just held each other. I don't think I could have handled it alone, hell I didn't really handle it well with her, but at least she kept me from going off the deep end.

The funeral is a busy time. There's so much to do. So many casseroles and hugs. It all goes by so fast, it's like a blur then it's over. It's calm. It's back to life, except it's not. It's not back to life because I can't pick up the phone and hear their voice. I can't vent to them and hear them say, it will be okay. They always said, "I'm proud of you son. You have grown into a fine grown man and we couldn't be prouder. You have courage in this world to be you, what more could we ask for." The thought of never hearing that again was almost too unbearable, but then I realized I was making this all about me. They may not be in the mountains like they had hoped, but they are free. They never had to see each other get sick and wonder who was going to go home first. They never knew what hit them, they didn't suffer, it was over so fast. They lived this life together since they were kids, and now they went home liked they had always lived. Together.

Shortly after life went back to normal for everyone else, Norma started sleeping in the same bed as I did at night.

"Don't get the wrong idea sport. We both are tired of sleeping alone, so this just works. The loneliness hits harder at night."

That was all she said, and that was all she needed to say. We might not have been in love like a normal couple, but we had grown to love each other. Love is love.

VI.

Life comes fast and it comes brutal, all we can do is just hang on. As much as we think we can plan, well isn't that a cruel joke. In my free time I would just try to write out my feelings. Poetry was easy. I didn't have to think too hard. It just flowed out the tip of my pen as if someone else was doing the writing. Not everything is autobiographical. Not everything is fiction. It's just what was at the time.

As much I loved writing just for myself, I began wanting to share my writing with others. Was anyone else like me out there? Could anyone else connect with what I was trying to say?

I was still a young writer in my infant stage. I wanted to share but I was terrified at the same time. I'd rather be naked in front of an auditorium full of people than share my poems. That would be less revealing in reality. A body is just skin and bones but your art is who you are. Your art is a window into your soul, into your heart, into your deepest truth.

After a few months of writing, I decided to make a chapbook. It wasn't a fancy one. I used the copy machine at the store to do it. They didn't care as long as I bought the paper myself. Now I was a poet. Now what.

I was too nervous to show Norma. She was a real artist after all. I

was nobody. She could tell I was writing something but she understood my fears. Even more than I did really. She had walked this walk on her own journey.

I timidly asked the store owner if I could have a poetry night there. Purely for creative masturbatory reasons of course, but I needed to start somewhere. He gave me this side eye glance but could tell I really wanted to do it. I think his round about response was, “don’t burn down the place.” Sounded enough like a yes for me.

It was time to set the event in motion. The beginning of an era. The start of a new creative endeavor. Oh the butterflies. Like any fine gala planner would do, I made a crude sign to put on the front door of the store, “Poetry night this Saturday. Free snacks. Bring your own poetry.” No turning back now. The point of no return. It was going to happen.

Oh, I was nervous all week. Locals would whisper about it. Not to be mean but just curious on what this was about. An artist may have lived in this town but this was not an art town by any stretch. I could hardly sleep Friday night.

The big day was here. 7:00pm was go time. I was queasy all day. Oh, I wish I never said anything. I knew I was about to be the laugh of the town. It would be so bad the Clarion Ledger would have to report on it.

Two dozen donuts from the Piggly Wiggly and a fresh pot of Folgers and we were ready. 6:55, any minute they will pour in. I think the people who came were just curious. No one brought any poetry. A few people flipped through my chapbook then promptly returned it to the stack. Politely asking what it was about before reading the first word. “Interesting.” That’s what I heard a lot of.

Norma was the only one who took any interest in what I was doing.

That night after the event she tried to keep my spirits up. “Head up kiddo.” I didn’t know if I should cry or just give up.

“The thing about being creative kid,” Norma started so sweetly. “It’s not up to you. There’s that fire in you that forces you to create. It’s like breathing. You have no choice. You don’t do it for them kiddo.”

It took me years to realize that was how it was. I thought it was just some pep talk to keep me going but turns out that is exactly what it is. Whatever lights the flame of creativity, it can’t be reversed. You are forever a medium to the creative universe. Ideas will just flow through you freely and at will. Is it a curse or a gift, I’m not sure it’s either. It’s just chaos. It’s just what is.

On our drives to Jackson she would pull out my chapbook and read a poem. “What’s the story?” She would ask each time. Eager to get me talking about writing so she could say “Keep it up kiddo. It’s good stuff.” I wasn’t sure if she meant it or not but I was grateful to hear it each time. She would brag to the gallery owner that I was a poet. “A real Hemingway he is.” She would say jokingly but affectionately. She forced her artsy friends in Jackson to take a copy. None of them ever made fun of my writing but they never asked about it either. They were just indifferent. I wasn’t sure if they liked it or not. That’s torture when you have zero feedback from people you don’t know. Then again, it’s not pure rejection at least.

VII.

At this point my car was fixed and ready to go. Been ready for awhile actually. I didn't mind driving the van but that old Chevy was a chore to drive. The Prius stayed parked mostly. I didn't want to leave. Born was my home now. More so than Born, it was Norma. It was an unspoken bond. We would sleep in the same bed most nights. Her arm wrapped around me from behind. I think I was mainly her stuffed animal. Something warm at night. I didn't mind though. It was nice not to be alone. She never asked about money or asked me to pay bills. I tried to do my share of the cooking and cleaning. I'd keep the van maintained and ready for our trips to Jackson. It was nice. It was home.

She was invited to be a guest of honor at a Pride Y'all event in Jackson. They asked her to do a live painting there to raise money for local LGBTQIA needs. I didn't realize she knew so many people. While she was busy I would sit at her booth answering what questions I could. "So you must be Hemingway." I heard that about 200 times. I don't think she ever used my real name. She had pet names for those she loved so I felt special in that regard.

The coordinators at that event gave Norma enough passes to fill her large table with fifteen of her hand picked guests. What it felt like was fourteen people to interrogate me while we ate roasted chicken

with asparagus and green beans. It might as well have been a black and white noir film because I was getting grilled by these dicks. Even though they lacked, well never mind.

She would take up for me and remind them she was grown and had a good head on her shoulders. “He’s an honorary lesbian.” She would jokingly say. “He can’t help he was born this way.”

We never really ever talked about what I was attracted to in a person. I never gave it much though honestly. I look at the person as a unique person. Not by what’s attached to the skin. We can’t help who we love. If you think you can, well you have never been in love I guess. I’m not sure I have either. I just know I never look at anyone and say, I can’t love them because of something superficial. I don’t do labels so take that as you will. I love hearts not parts.

When we are unhappy and everyday is exactly the same, we want it to end so badly. At this point I didn’t mind the routine. It was comforting actually. It was slow. I felt like I was exactly where I belonged. Norma didn’t care to date anymore. Her love for Lucy never let her even think of another woman. She loved sleeping in her *I Love Lucy* gown. I’m not sure if she even liked the show but the words were true. She held those memories so close. So close that no one could ever make her part with what she now cherished the most.

“It was so fast.” She said unexpectedly at breakfast one day. “She had a terrible headache. She was nauseas. I had no idea it would end like that. She was flown to the hospital in Jackson. I was able to drive there and had just enough time to kiss her lips one last time. Then she was gone. At least I got to tell my one true love goodbye. At least this fucked up world gave me that kiddo.”

I just stopped what I was doing and hugged her. “I’m so sorry.”

That's all I could say. No words could make that hurt go away. When you lose someone you don't want that hurt to go away. That hurt reminds you just how much you loved them. It's a harsh reminder but it helps in some messed up way.

"Love you kiddo." She would say. I knew it was true. It was a different kind of love. I would always be below Lucy and that was okay.

VIII.

We loved each other in our own way for twenty something years. More years than she got with Lucy. More years than I thought possible to put up with someone. Love takes many forms and can be called many things.

On the nights she drank, those would usually turn into nights of tears. She'd get out the bourbon and I knew it would be a wild ride emotionally. We never had sex. She wouldn't let herself take it that far. I think she maybe wanted to but just couldn't cheat on Lucy. In her mind it would be cheating. I know that's how she would see it. We would dance to loud music. Sit outside under the stars on the cold nights. The hot nights we would get eat up by the largest damn mosquitos ever known to man but that's another story there.

I remember one night in particular we were dancing under the stars on a cold winter night. We had a small fire going in the field. Dancing to songs on the radio. The night was ours. The stars were so bright and so calming. Quickly the clouds covered the nights sky and it started to rain.

"Dance close with me kiddo." She said. She put her head on my chest as we slow danced to a fast song. I'm not sure what song she heard in her head but I knew she must be lost in her own world. As she often was on these dark nights.

“Have you ever wanted to dance naked in the rain under the stars?” she quietly said as she started getting undressed. I froze there, unsure the proper way to respond. This caught me off guard. This was not in the routine. This was, new.

She held me close as our bodies pressed tightly against one another. The cold rain was not a issue since we were keeping each other warm. Keeping each other standing in the dark nights sky. She was looking up in my eyes as I was locked in her gaze. I’d never seen this look before. Her hands were exploring my new body as I was hers like never before.

I nervously leaned down and gently kissed her lips. She gasped and grabbed me tighter. Feeling the nights breeze caress our bodies as our lips touched for the first time. My whole body tingling as shivers shot through every inch of my soul. She took my hand and guided us toward the blanket we were sitting on. It didn’t matter what the world would think of us out there that dark night. For one brief night we had each others embrace. Each others kiss. Each others eternal love and desire. For that one night we were free to just be ourselves, in our own special way. The rest of that night would only be for us.

We never talked about that night. Not until later anyway. That night was our bond to each other, if only briefly anyway. We would still resume our sleeping in the same bed routine. Fully clothed and purely innocent.

Years would pass. I would write poems and she would paint. We would make our trips to Jackson. We would help each other get through this cold and lonely world. Never again would we feel each others bodies like we did that one night, but that one night was always enough and always cherished.

IX.

“Hey come look at this,” she said as she was looking at her boob in the mirror. “Does that look like a rash? What the fuck is that!?”

“Um, I’m not sure,” I said trying not to look too hard but look enough.

“Oh geez. It’s just a damn titty,” she says reminding me if I had somehow forgot.

I had to beg her to go get it looked at. She was sick of me begging and worrying.

“Fuck, fine I’ll go!” I’m pretty sure that’s how she so eloquently agreed to go get it checked out. I don’t think she wanted to know either way. I’m very much a worse case scenario kind of guy, if you can’t tell by my poetry. I realize now, all that nagging was just for me. It was to try to calm myself down. It was never about what she wanted.

We hold so tightly to that we love. Sometimes without any regard for what they would want. It’s human nature. We like to feel good. Sadness may be like a warm blanket at times but overall we would much rather choose what makes us truly happy.

A few weeks had passed while I nagged away at her. Each time I saw her patients get less and less. Each time she would say there’s no results yet and to stop worrying. She knew what I was feeling from

experience but she also knew she was the only person who could live her life. Even though we may be surrounded by the ones we love, we can only experience this world alone.

It is in these moments were only you can have those conversations with death. If there is a room with four people in it, there are four realities, there are four experiences that are totally and utterly unique. One can't experience what the other is feeling. Only we can assess our life and determine the course of action when only we can walk the path laid out before us.

"We gotta talk, kiddo," she said with a look of dread and yet calm on her face. I can't remember what else she said. I just know the world changed once again right in front of me. The copy of a copy of a copy routine that I had once hated in my previous life, I adored in this one. I loved our routines. I loved watching her paint. She was so effortless in her stroke, as if her one true purpose in this world was to capture it's magical beauty. It was like the great creator talked directly to her. As if He saw this world directly through her eyes. All that we had, all that we were would now be on a time clock, I know it always is but now it was like a NBA shot clock in our living room.

She explained to me that she didn't want to go through all the treatments and lose who she was, she didn't want science to determine her path in this world, not in this way. She had already made plans for her burial and where she would be buried. She contacted Lucy's family to ask permission for her to buy the plot next to her. All these weeks I thought there was no results, she had been making plans. She wanted to wrap up the final days in her life. I replay this moment a thousand times in my mind. Each time it changes just a little. I'm pretty sure the way I recall it now, I was so

patient and so supportive. I know that's not how it went down but that's how I wish it would have happened. The true stories of the past are blurred by the human existence now. No memory is a true memory, not old memories anyway. It's all just another fake home movie in our head.

X.

Time is ruthless when you want to hold on so tightly to the present moment. Pushing you through life only to stop short in the end. The months leading up to Norma's passing were some of happiest times of my life, however each second was always overshadowed with the inevitability of the silence that waits.

With my parents, I didn't know. I didn't know until I did. It was unplanned, it just happened. One morning I had two parents still alive and by lunch, they were gone from this journey here on this little rock.

With Norma, I would go to sleep at night and dream we were on our way to Jackson in the van singing about buying a Mercedes Benz as loud as we could. I would wake to the feeling of the cold air, she wasn't in my bed anymore. She was in her own bed so she could be more comfortable.

I would hear story after story as her friends stopped in over the months to check in on her and in their own way process her death that was hurling at us all. A lifetime recapped in a couple hours, all ending in tears and goodbyes. No one new what day would be the day and nothing could prepare anyone for the reality.

Every night before we went to bed we would have a short chat before I went into my own room, my own lonely bed. Every night I

would tell her that I loved her and her response was always,”I love you too, kiddo.”

The morning it happened, I woke up and before I got out bed I knew the house was more lonely than it should be. I just laid in bed and cried, trying to dry my tears. Trying to not make it about me. Trying to process the fact that I hadn’t known for certain yet, but I could feel it in my heart.

I walked down the hall and walked in her room. Before I even checked I knew she was with Lucy again. As I looked at her face I could see the most faint smile left behind. I had no idea what her last moment was like, but I knew Lucy was there to help her along the path that waited for those two.

The night before the funeral I was so furious with God. He was taking away everyone that was ever important in my life. How could he be such a merciful God if he takes with no regard to anyone left behind. Like a spoiled child taking their toy back after you played with it for a day. Mine. She’s mine, it felt like he was saying in that bratty child voice. Oh, I was so angry.

You can say what you want, but I know what I saw that night. I saw Norma in my dreams. She was with Lucy. Lucy looked at me and said,”Hey sport, we never really met but I want to thank you for taking such good care of my true love. You did good, I owe you one.”

Norma just looked at me and smiled, “You’ll be getting some information soon kiddo. My lawyers are taking care of everything for you. Love you, kiddo. I’ll see you soon okay. I gotta go, lots to do now.” That was the last time I saw Norma. I know I’ll see her again soon though. I always hope I see her in my dreams but she hasn’t

come just yet. I think she wants me to move on here. She has a lot of catching up to do with Lucy anyway. Lucy may have been Norma's one true love, but Norma showed me the meaning of unconditional love. Through Norma, I got to experience what the greatest love in the universe could look like, and for that I am ever grateful.

After the funeral, Norma's lawyer spoke with me and told me just to stay in the trailer, he would get back with me in a couple weeks to work everything out. Nothing he said really registered with me anyway and he knew that. He wasn't just her lawyer in the end, he worked with her since she was in her twenties. They were as much family as anyone. I think he needed some time to collect himself so he could approach the business side of death. Funny how even in death you aren't done, still papers to sign and a bunch of nonsense to sort through.

The trailer was too quiet. It was a constant reminder of what I had lost. Her art was everywhere, her clothes still hung in the closet, her scent still lingered in the air. This wasn't my house. This was Norma's house. I was once again homeless because nowhere feels like home. Norma was my home. She was my shelter, she kept me safe and out of the rain.

Her attorney came to the trailer one afternoon to sort out the business dealings. He had way more paper in his hands than I thought was needed for these types of situations. I guess lawyers like to say stuff in a really complicated long winded kind of way. There's no way I can remember exactly how he said everything but I'll recount it the best way I can and in a short concise way.

She insisted that my chapbook be published, this was actually the

number one thing on the list, I found that very odd at the end but at first I thought that was all he was telling me. Cool, she published my book. That is a pretty awesome gift. I don't mean like self publish either, she had convinced a real deal large publisher to publish my book and make it available in all major book stores in the U.S. and other countries. I was now a real published author, she made my dream come true. I just wish she could have seen my face, I'm pretty sure she could though.

Next, was a complete shock. "She left all her assets in your name. She sold all her rights to all her works of art so you don't have to sort all that out, she did leave you one painting of hers." He said. I had no idea what painting he would pull out, he uncovered the painting from it's protective case and the tears started flowing down my face the instant I saw it. It was my campsite in Born. She actually finished it and kept it all this time. On the back there was a note only she could leave, it said: I wanted you to always remember your first home here in Born. I also wanted to thank you for making that drafty and cold trailer a warm and inviting home. I love you kiddo. Forever and Always, Norma.

"There's one last thing she left you, and I gotta say, it's a bit weird, even for Norma. She left you the burial plot next to her. She said it's totally up to you if you didn't want it but she would like you to consider it. She left you this short note."

Hey kiddo,

I hope you will join us when it comes time. You know Lucy was my true love. She was my world ya know, but you got to me kiddo. You made my last years worth living. Love you kiddo.

P.s. - If you tell anyone about that night, well I'll have to come and haunt you won't I. Wouldn't be too bad to see you again anyway. Haha.

XI.

It's been a long road with a lot of detours. If you had asked me at 18 how I thought life would have turned out, well it sure as shit wouldn't have been like this. Not in my wildest dreams could I have ever dreamed of a life such as this one.

Life is chaos after all, a long string of chaos that we look back on and turn into a story. The concerns and worries I had as a college student have all been long washed away. My fears and ideas have all been long gone destroyed and replaced time and time again.

Success had nothing to do with money or fame. Success has nothing to do with a book being in the bookstores or just on my own bookshelf. My greatest success in life was in the experiences alone.

I have no idea what lays ahead of me, or how long I have to walk this Earth. As a poet should, I will leave you with these words.

I had lived a thousand lives
And dreamed a thousand dreams.
I have sailed around the oceans
Only to find what lies in me.
I have soared along the milky way
And I have lived among the stars
I have soared to all the planets
And touched the dirt of mars
All that I would give
All that now remains
To hold you in my arms
And kiss you once again
I might not have been your love
But you were my one and only
Alas, I found my peace and my home
In the land of the quiet and the lonely.

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The poems in this story are poems that I wrote over the last several years. Some more than a decade ago. Even though the story is fiction, there are many elements of my own life on these pages.

Any time a writer of any kind says, it's about nothing. It's about everything.

With that said....

It's just a story.
